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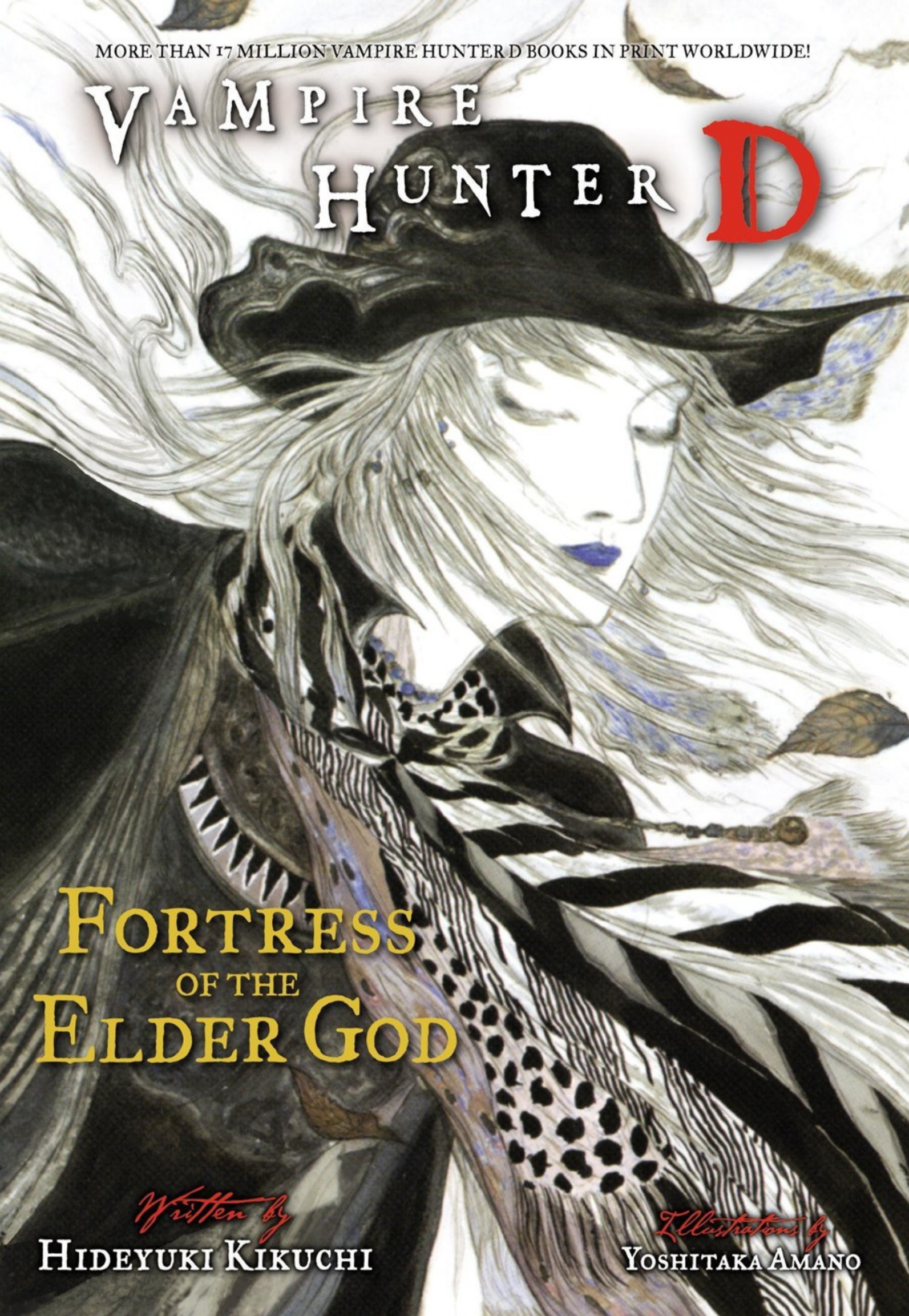

FORTRESS OF THE ELDER GOD

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
YOSHITAKA AMANO

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

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VOLUME 18

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English translation by

KEVIN LEAHY

Dark Horse Books
Milwaukie

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Los Angeles

VAMPIRE HUNTER D VOLUME 18: FORTRESS OF THE ELDER GOD

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Fortress of the Elder God

TRAVELERS ON A SKYBUS

CHAPTER 1

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I

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Apparently the waiting room was poorly maintained, and biting drafts crisscrossed its not particularly spacious interior. You might even say the wind seemed to be showing off. It was better than being outside, however, as the warmth from a battered atomic heater offset the cold, and there was no howl from the wind. If the roar of the engines had been audible, it actually would've completed the picture.

There were ten passengers in the waiting room. For an airport situated in a hick town in the eastern Frontier, it certainly had drawn a mixed bunch. There wasn't even a single example of those whom it served the most—farmers.

A young woman draped in a metallic stole walked over to the window, hair as golden as the fibers swaying as she did so.

"Looks like they're done loading the baggage. Guess we'll be boarding pretty soon," she said. Her remarks weren't addressed to anyone in particular.

A man with a crew cut who'd been fidgeting with a deck of playing cards and an old man and woman who appeared to be husband and wife looked at her, but all three held their silence. The man with the crew cut was young—undoubtedly under thirty—and he had a crescent-shaped scar running down his right cheek. Judging by the way he'd repeatedly tried to strike up a conversation with the young woman, he seemed pleasant enough, but he was clearly a mobster. The front of his synthetic-leather jacket was open, revealing his gun belt and the broadsword tucked through it.

"Any time now. Being able to get to the Capital in six hours is handy," the mobster began, and wiping the smile from his face, he ran his eyes over the group until they bored through a trio seated in the opposite corner. "The only drawback is you don't get to pick who you fly with."

The object of this frank remark was an individual who remained completely motionless, an opaque black-canvas hood covering his eyes, and a pair of hands bound by handcuffs resting in his lap. Instead, it was the men to either side of him that shot the mobster vicious looks—one of them a big, bearded man with a sheriff's badge pinned to the chest of his shirt, the other a much younger man wearing the uniform of a police officer from the Capital. The younger one had a metal cylinder strapped to his back, and a gold badge glittered on the chest of his leather coat.

A policeman from the Capital had come to take custody of a criminal captured in the Frontier, and a sheriff had joined him in that task as part of his duty—the situation would be clear to anyone at a glance. There was one other obvious assumption to be made—most of the criminals who wore hoods to protect themselves from the sun weren't human.

Turning to the elderly couple, the mobster said, "You folks drew the short straw. You're out enjoying a nice family trip, only to have a suckling spoil it all. Ain't that right, kid?"

Though he was looking for agreement from the boy who sat next to the elderly couple, the child didn't nod at this, or move a muscle, or even glance in the mobster's direction. Apparently he was being transferred from one orphanage to another, and though he'd had a nun with him earlier, at some point she'd disappeared. Since entering the waiting room, the boy hadn't uttered a single word. Maybe the nun had given up, because she'd held her tongue as well, and a coldness had hung between the two of them that suggested they were glad to be rid of each other. The fox-faced nun seemed to have her own issues, but from the look of the boy's threadbare navy-blue overcoat, tightly wrapped muffler, drooping head, and nice-looking but pale face, anyone could see why someone would give up on him.

The rest of the people there glanced his way from time to time out of concern for his quasi-autistic condition and because his vacant, half-shut blue eyes would suddenly start gleaming. Most of them thought the same thing: *People would pay money to see a boy with beautiful eyes like that. No point putting him on a skybus that flies over the Playground.*

Unable to get any validation from the boy, the mobster clucked his tongue.

There was one other person present, but he didn't even look at him, let alone say anything. The man seemed to have something unearthly about him. With a crimson cape and a scarf of the same hue, he seemed to be ablaze. He had a hard face, like sculpted bronze, and despite his wardrobe he didn't seem the frivolous type. When he'd entered the waiting room, he hadn't taken one of the many empty seats; rather, he stood by the door, his left hand resting lightly on the hilt of his longsword. One didn't need to see that his blade was longer and heavier than those usually used for self-defense to know that he was a combat professional—he carried himself like a warrior. The strangest thing about him was the quiver he had on his back—it was stuffed full of arrows, but he didn't have a bow. Ordinarily, everyone else would've eyed him with suspicion, but it was completely the opposite. Whenever the elderly couple looked at him, they exchanged looks of relief and nodded to each other. Because there was a suckling there.

"Here comes the pilot!" the woman said, and this time everyone—except the warrior—looked out the window.

From the fat, cigar-shaped craft parked on the distant runway, a man in a flight suit was approaching. The pilot looked at his wristwatch as he told them, "Get onboard, please. Well, I'll be damned. We're only thirty minutes behind schedule."

Before the passengers headed out, their eyes focused on the hooded man in handcuffs. However, when the sheriff tugged on the thin line attached to those cuffs, the suckling got up without any resistance and proceeded outside where only wintry sunlight and bare trees waited, with one lawman before him and the other behind.

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To either side of the cramped central aisle there were ten rows of seats, three to a row. First aboard, the woman took an aisle seat in the foremost row, and was sipping the contents of a small liquor bottle when along came the same mobster from earlier.

"Sorry, baby, but could you scoot over a bit?"

When that well-tanned face bared its pearly white teeth to her, the woman responded with a wry look of undisguised annoyance.

“There are plenty of other empty seats. I don’t want you crowding me.”

“Oh, don’t be that way. To make a long story short, we’re taking our lives in our hands during this flight. If I’m gonna die, I wanna be beside a lovely lady. Humor me, okay?”

More than his forceful approach, it was probably his carefree smile that changed the woman’s mind. Swinging her legs into the aisle, she said, “Take the window seat.”

“That’s mighty kind of you. I’m Jan.”

“And I’m not giving you my name,” the woman said, downing the contents of her little silver cup.

The man—Jan—quickly made his way to the window seat and was fastening the rubber seat belt when he gave her a funny look and a smile and said, “No problem, Maria, baby!”

The woman’s expression changed.

“Your stole. It’s embroidered there.”

“Oh, this thing?” the woman replied, looking down at one end where the metallic threads were coming loose. “That’s not my name. It belongs to the woman who lost it to me at the gaming tables. She was a fat farmer’s wife.”

“Well, that’s okay. If it doesn’t bother you none, I’ll still call you that.”

“Suit yourself. Whether you know my name or not won’t make a bit of difference.”

The engine began to growl.

Peeking back between the seats, Jan said to Maria, “Strange mix we got here. Don’t you think?”

Apparently he made a habit of soliciting agreement from other people. As the woman made no reply but rather kept drinking as if in a foul mood, he went on talking.

“That kid’s keeper never did come back. For a nun, of all people, to pull something so irresponsible, either the kid’s got his act together so well there’s no need to worry, or it’s the complete opposite. My take on it is, he’s a major problem child. When no one sees you off, it’s because they just want you gone. I don’t know if he’s got someone waiting for him on the other end, but he’d be a handful for anyone, that’s for sure. I mean, that nun was from the freaking Shillonget Monastery. To get tossed out of there, you’d have to be a real piece of work. There’s a medallion around his neck. It’s probably got all the details carved into it, and I wouldn’t mind a peek at that.”

While the mobster was blithering, the skybus had slowly started to glide down the runway. The scenery—a mossy old landing strip, decaying hangars, and a distant mountain range—began to race past the windows faster and faster.

While Jan gave his tongue a rest, the aircraft made expert use of rising air currents to climb to sixteen thousand feet and enter the jet stream.

“It looks like we’re in, all right,” the old man looking out the window said softly to his wife, who sat beside him with her hands pressed to her chest. “Now it’s just a straight shot to the Capital. Pare should be meeting us at the airport. Are you in pain, dear?”

“I’m fine,” his elderly wife replied, a smile gracing her paling face. “This happens every time. But will Pare really be coming?”

“Of course. I wrote to him, and we got a reply at the hotel, didn’t we? He’s a good boy, that one is. Unlike Depp.”

“Depp is just honest, that’s all. No one’s happy to have over a couple of old relics like us, whether they’re our sons or not.”

“That’s not true. After everything you and I did for those boys—”

Though the elderly man’s hoary eyebrows arched, his wife replied wearily, “Pare’s the kindest of the bunch. He won’t come out and say it—but we’re inconveniencing him. Once we’re in the Capital, let’s find a cheap hotel and stay there instead. That’d be easier on all of us.”

“There’s no need to do that. You know how hard we worked for—”

The old man’s eyes were bulging, but he relaxed when he saw his wife’s doleful

expression. Taking a deep breath, he rolled back through his memories.

“Inge and Pages were both happy to see us, weren’t they? Depp, well, that was another story, but Pare—”

Suddenly he noticed that his wife had opened her eyes and was staring intently at him.

“What is it, dear?”

“Nothing,” the old woman said with a sad shake of her head. She wanted to tell him he was wrong. “Not a thing. You’re right. They’ve all been so good to us, haven’t they?”

“They sure have.”

Happy that his wife had finally agreed with him, the elderly man nodded repeatedly.

His aged wife managed to keep the hopeless smile on her face as she gazed at her husband, saying, “We pass over the Playground, don’t we?”

It wasn’t really a question. Though the old man sensed something terribly disconsolate in her tone, he’d long since lost the desire to try to discover what that was.

“Yes, we do,” he replied, turning his gaze to the window again.

Their fourth son would be coming to meet them.

With unsettling creaks here and there, the skybus continued flying smoothly at a speed of 330 miles per hour.

A tiny whisper rose in the aircraft’s silent interior: “Soon now.” While it wasn’t loud enough that the person in the neighboring seat could hear it, almost everyone there trembled.

At that instant, something happened—a heartbeat later, the skybus was thrown off balance, slipping from the jet stream and dropping toward the ground at an angle sharper than any dive.

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II

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“What in the*world*? He’s kicked the bucket!”

Though he heard Maria say this, Jan didn’t believe her, so he took the pilot’s pulse and felt for a heartbeat before letting go of his wrist again.

“Now we don’t have anyone to fly the skybus. Or am I wrong, and one of you can pilot this thing?”

The mobster looked over his shoulder at the survivors—all of the passengers—but naturally, there was no reply.

Apparently the nameless pilot had been highly skilled, taking the skybus from a fall that was essentially a vertical tailspin and pulling the nose up at the last minute for a landing that would’ve been considered miraculous on level ground, let alone this rocky expanse.

However, the miracle ended there, and the reality was that the passengers scattered across the rocks had sustained very real injuries. The old man’s left arm had been broken, and after finally pulling the first-aid kit from the somewhat-damaged skybus, Maria and the sheriff were in the process of setting it in a splint. The policeman, who was far younger than the sheriff, had suffered some bruising to his right shoulder, but he had nothing more than a damp cloth to put on it for the pain. The impact after their fall had left the liquid contents of the jar of painkillers splattered against the bottom of the kit.

Though both the boy and the warrior were unharmed, one had gone over to lean against a massive crag and not moved any further, while the other simply stood there scanning the area in all directions.

“Any of you folks familiar with the local geography?” the sheriff asked, looking over the group.

Grimacing, Jan said, “That’d have to be *you*.”

“I suppose it would,” the sheriff said, a wry look coming to his face, above his triple chins, before he surveyed their surroundings. He’d already looked the scenery over a good ten times, and not a blessed thing had changed. It was a wasteland strewn with boulders as far as the eye could see. There wasn’t a speck of greenery, but there was plenty of wind to slice into them like a knife. It came

across the distant yellow expanse of sand. Before them towered steep crags.

It was just past three o'clock Afternoon. Though there was still plenty of light, once that was gone it'd be like a winter's day in no time at all. It wouldn't even take an hour.

After checking the time with his wristwatch, the sheriff looked up at the sun to judge position, as was often done on the Frontier, giving a nod as he said, "We could pull the equipment out of the skybus to figure out where we are, but basically this is the center of the Playground. No matter which way we try to go, it'll be the same distance out of here."

"So which direction is the safest?" asked Jan. There was hostility in his tone. Lawmen were the sworn enemy of mobsters, after all.

"They're all the same," the sheriff answered off the cuff. "If the village where we boarded had a Danger Potential rating of one, this whole region would have to be over one hundred thousand DP."

"Then shouldn't we hurry up and head for the Capital?" the pale-faced policeman said with urgency. "Most of us are alive, and there's a little food and water left in the skybus. We should be trying to get out of this hellhole as fast as we can."

"You suggesting we cross the Playground without a car?" Jan jeered. "I'm sure you're a big man back in the Capital, but do you have any idea what kind of place the Nobility made this Playground of theirs? You know, I'm surprised we've lasted this long. They're already wise to us. If they wanted to, they could tear us to pieces right now. When you think about it, staying or going is pretty much the same."

The young policeman decided to meet the mobster head on. Eyes squinting angrily, he said, "I'd expect a lousy thug like you to be that ignorant. This is known as the E3 Playground, and aerial photos of this region are taken on a regular basis. According to them, no life forms exist out here."

"Can they tell from the sky what's underground, buddy?" Jan snapped back. "Legend has it these things will wait thousands of years without moving a muscle, just biding their time until some stupid prey like us come into their domain. Aerial photos? Don't make me laugh!"

“You lousy smartass!”

The policeman used his uninjured left hand to go for the pistol on his weapons belt, while Jan said, “Hey, now,” and reached for his broadsword. Tension coalesced around the two of them.

“That’ll be enough of that,” a rusty voice interrupted, and it sounded like a fitting arbitrator.

Everyone turned in unison toward the speaker, relieved expressions on their faces. *At last*, they thought.

“Until we get out of here, we need everyone we can get,” the warrior said. His crimson scarf danced in the breeze.

The policeman twisted his lips as if to say, *Is this guy against me, too?* “This region is safe. There’s nothing here. You’re all frightened by unfounded legends.”

“Those same legends will keep rescuers from coming,” the warrior said.

This silenced the policeman.

Entry into the Playground for any reason was prohibited—parents weren’t even allowed to run out there in search of a child who’d wandered into it. Going in to rescue a skybus that had made an emergency landing was out of the question. They could send a distress signal, shoot off flares, or even spell out *help* on the ground with their bodies, but still no one would come.

“The Playground is laid out as an almost-perfect circle three hundred miles in diameter. To cross it on foot, taking into account the speed of women and children, would take a good twenty days. And with the number of people we’ve got here, our food and water won’t last two days, no matter how we ration it. That’s why we can’t afford to lose anyone to a stupid scuffle.”

“Why not?” Maria asked, sounding slightly unsettled.

The answer was perfectly simple.

“We might have to eat them.”

At this, everyone’s expression became one of horror. No one could say a word.

Looking overhead, the warrior said, “The sun will be going down soon, and the

temperature will drop below freezing. You lose a lot of strength then, too. So I'll thank you to see that we don't lose any possibly vital sources of nutrition."

"Guess we'll be camping out today," the sheriff groaned, looking up at the sky.

Nodding, the warrior said, "Yes, and there's one thing we have to take care of before we set out. You must know what that is. Why did our skybus go down?"

Up until this point, the elderly couple had been intently listening to what the warrior had to say, but as their eyes burned with curiosity, their expressions froze.

"What do you think, Ms. Maria?"

As the warrior singled her out, the woman turned away in a snit.

"I don't care to have people use my name so freely. What's yours, anyway?"

"Begging your pardon. I'm Bierce—a warrior."

It was unclear if his response improved Maria's mood any, because she continued to look away from him as she said, "I get the feeling I saw something, but I can't remember anything about it. All I know is what I felt. And that was *fear* itself."

That caused a stir in the group. Everyone—except the boy and the suckling—agreed with her.

"That's right. That's exactly what killed the pilot and made the skybus crash. But how did it happen?"

This time silence tightened around the group. At that moment, they once again felt the same "fear itself" that Maria had mentioned. Letting out an inhuman cry, the old woman clung to her husband. The mobster and the policeman closed their eyes and quaked as if fighting great pain, and beads of sweat rose on the sheriff's face.

A terror that could smash through even the strongest mind. Where did such a thing come from?

"Sheriff, is there some kind of illness going around that airport?"

"An illness? No, nothing like that. Hell, not even plagues bother going to a

dried-up hole in the wall like that."

"Then it would have to be someone's doing."

Everyone stopped moving.

The warrior continued in his stoic tone, saying, "Odds are the culprit is among us."

"Wait just a damn minute!" Jan interjected. "We have no way of knowing that. Any fool could picture what'd happen if you released a terror like that on a skybus in flight and the pilot went goofy. You'd go down too. You'd all be in the same boat!"

"Maybe the one who did it was just going after one person and didn't use the power right. Or it could be the person in question doesn't even know when it's gonna happen."

Everyone in the group turned their heads the same direction in unison. As always, the boy was staring down at the ground, and the suckling remained silent.

"You don't mean . . ."

Maria's groan was easily drowned out by the warrior as he asked, "Sheriff, does this suckling have a power like that?"

"No, not so far as I know," the sheriff stated flatly, but the way he looked at the prisoner was peculiar. "We didn't hear any talk about anything like that from the area where he ran amuck. Nothing about infecting other people with fear."

"Not much is known about sucklings, on account of them always getting disposed of. Even if they *did* have a power like that, without the ability to control it, it wouldn't do a fat lot of good. They'd be put down before they ever got to use it."

The sheriff had no response. But the people envisioned a number of scenarios involving the suckling.

The policeman interrupted, saying, "Hey, don't get any funny ideas! Some of the top researchers in the Capital are waiting to experiment on this guy."

"I'm not saying he's the culprit," the warrior replied, his blue eyes focusing on

someone else.

“Kid, can you talk?” he asked, but there was no reply. “Now, I’ve been watching everyone, but the only one who doesn’t seem to have been changed by that fear is you. Or could it be you didn’t even feel it in the first place?”

Was the warrior trying to say the boy was responsible?

“Answer me if you can. Because until we get this cleared up, there’s no way we can let you come with us.”

“Hey, hold it right there,” the elderly man protested. “We don’t know for sure that child’s to blame. You just said so yourself, didn’t you? It’s not right, threatening a youngster like that!”

A stern rock of a face stared intently at the old man. The old man winced but managed to stand his ground.

“It seems to me you weren’t born out on the Frontier, were you?”

The old man nodded. “Right, we hail from the Capital. We’re traveling around now, visiting our children who live on the Frontier.”

“I see. If you’d lived a decade on the Frontier, you wouldn’t say something like that to save your own life. Male or female, young or old, it makes no difference. A kid’s just as likely to be a killer as anyone else. How many people you think die at the hands of children every year?”

“But I’m telling you, that child’s—”

“There’s no way around this, old-timer,” Jan interrupted. “From here on out, it’s sure to be a hell of a trip. I don’t care if he’s just a kid; we can’t bring anyone along that we’ve got any doubt about. What the warrior said is spot on. But there’s something to what you’re saying, too. Right now, there’s the same chance any of us is the one responsible. And with that in mind, I have a suggestion.”

It must’ve been a really good idea, because the mobster was bursting with confidence.

“Let’s try threatening the kid with a knife.”

Jan whipped around in amazement to stare at Maria.

Downing the contents of her cup, the woman responsible for the remark continued, “That’s what you were going to say, isn’t it? It’s not too hard to see what a guy like you is thinking. If the kid *is* to blame, you just might wind up getting us another taste of that fear. An insensitive clod like you might be able to take it, but how do you think those old folks would fare? Try using *this* for a change!”

The way she tapped the index finger of her free hand against her head made Jan’s eyes widen.

“You trying to say I’m not very *smart*?”

“You trying to say you are?”

“You—you bitch!” the mobster said, making a tight fist as he started toward Maria.

Just then, a low gasp of surprise rang out. Actually, there were two of them, from the sheriff and the policeman. They were staring at the boy. And they’d seen that he’d finally looked up.

“Someone’s coming,” the boy said in a dazed tone. Compared to other children his age, his voice was low and feeble. However, the fear it carried was hair-raisingly real.

“Someone’s coming,” the boy said again, and then he stood up.

Oblivious to the fact that the eyes of all were focused on him, he started to walk out of the rocky area.

“Who’s coming?” the policeman asked, blinking his eyes like mad.

“Is it *them*? The Playground’s dismantlers? Or is it—an *overseer*?”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” the sheriff shouted. “There’s nothing like that out here. Those are just old wives’ tales.”

“How about *that*, then?” the warrior asked.

Halting about five yards from the group, the boy turned his face to the west. The warrior was behind him. Everyone but the suckling stood up and looked in the same direction.

The area to the west was hidden by a yellow cloud of dust—whirling sand. Out of it, a black shape began to come into view, nearly five hundred yards away. In the depths of that sandy cloud, it was hard to tell if it was man or beast. Yet everyone there knew. It was a human being. A man. And one of unearthly beauty, at that.

The figure first appeared as slim as a blade of grass. It soon took on a distinctly human form. The wide-brimmed traveler's hat and pitch-black coat he wore and the saddlebags and elegant longsword over his shoulder became visible, and finally he halted before the group, all in less than ten minutes—and the whole time they simply stood there, unable to move a muscle. As if their bones had been fused together by the unearthly aura the figure emanated—by his beauty.

Knocking the sand from his coat with his left hand, he said softly, "I'm D." His whole form seemed swathed in glowing darkness.

"As you can probably see from that skybus, we're stranded survivors," the sheriff said. As a representative of the group, he was probably just about the perfect age. "You know, we were just about to head east. I don't know whether to consider you lucky or not. I'm the sheriff from the Valkin area. Shrive's the name."

"I'm—Maria." Though she was looking up, the woman's gaze and voice were both vacant—but that couldn't be helped when dealing with this young man.

“I’m Jan—and, as you can see, I’m a drifter.”

“I’m Franz Stow, and this is my wife, Bella,” the elderly man said. The old woman stared at the young man in black with a look in her eyes that suggested she was dreaming.

D’s eyes fixed on the boy, who hung his head low.

“What’s your name?” D inquired.

This was a miraculous occurrence, and it caused another miracle to happen. Though still facing the ground, the boy began to move his lips. What they formed was clearly a word.

“. . . Toto.”

“I’ll be damned!” Jan said, throwing his arms up in celebration. “I figured he didn’t have a brain in his head, but he can talk and everything. Hell, I guess even another guy couldn’t resist answering someone as good looking as you. Pretty ones and crying kids have all the luck in this world.”

“That’s a nice name,” D said before looking at the strangest member of the group—the hooded figure.

“He’s a suckling,” the sheriff said disdainfully. There was probably no need to keep telling people that, but he did anyway. He didn’t even know that he did so out of fear. “We’re in the process of transferring him to a government research facility in the Capital. At any rate, he’s shot full of drugs. Keeps him quiet.”

“Don’t give civilians more information than they need, sheriff,” the policeman said, stopping him. “This guy has a strange air about him. He’s no ordinary traveler. What are you, anyway? And what are you doing out here?”

“My horse has expired. As for my line of work—”

“He’s a Vampire Hunter.”

The world was robbed of every last sound. As they all stared at D, not even the wind whispered in their ears. At that moment, they all thought, *Yes, that’s exactly what he is.*

D’s eyes turned to the man who’d spoken.

“Vampire Hunter D, it’s an honor to meet you. I’m—”

“Bierce the warrior—I’ve heard of you.”

“Then that’s an even greater honor,” Bierce said, a grin surfacing on his bearded face and then vanishing.

The Vampire Hunter’s meeting with the warrior ended there.

D casually turned to the policeman, who backed away.

“I—um, I’m Officer Weizmann, on prisoner-escort duty for the Ministry of Police.”

“Get out of here quick,” D said. He was facing east. His tone suggested he didn’t have an iota of interest in anyone in the group. “The enemy will be here soon. Any talk of this place being safe is mistaken.”

“Really?” the sheriff said, looking all around.

“Don’t give us that crap. We don’t see anything here,” the squinting Weizmann protested, having circled around in front of the Hunter.

“Have it your way.”

And leaving them with this remark, D started to walk off.

“Hold up—me and Maria are going with you!” Jan shouted, but D didn’t stop.

“Just a minute. Don’t go speaking for me,” Maria said, her breath reeking of alcohol.

“Hey, I know what I’m talking about here. I’ve been doing what I do for ten years now. When things get hairy, I know who you can count on. And without a doubt, it’s *that* guy. C’mon, kid. Come with us.”

Toto didn’t move. The beauty that had brought back the boy’s humanity for a brief moment was now a good fifty yards ahead of them.

Jan had no problem cutting him loose.

“Okay, it’s your funeral. Someone look after this kid. He’s in your hands. Hey, anyone else coming?” he asked as he grabbed his simple travel case and got to his feet.

After careful deliberation, the elderly Franz rose. “We’re going with you. Come along, dear,” he said, taking his wife by the hand.

“Good idea,” Bierce chimed in, hefting a battered duffel bag.

“Wait just a minute!” Weizmann cried, his face going pale. “We’re the ones who’ll keep you safe—not some mobster and a Hunter you don’t know from a hole in the ground. Don’t you get it? Splitting up out here is dangerous. How are we supposed to save you if—”

Apparently Sheriff Shrive had grown tired of listening to the young lawman’s protestations, for in an effort to quiet him he told the man, “It’s no use.”

“But—”

“What are you gonna do? Stay here? I’ll help you if you do.”

“I thought you just said we should go.”

As he stared with a look of disgust at the backs of those who hurried ahead, Weizmann stomped his feet in place and checked the fit of his shoes.

“Before we go, let’s bury the pilot,” the sheriff said, raining a little on the younger man’s parade.

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Before long, the three figures walked off in pursuit of the others, who were already out of sight, and as stillness choked the rocky spot, something bizarre transpired. Though no one was aware of it, the voices of men and women, as well as the wind and various other sounds, could be heard in the deserted wasteland. Sure enough, they were the voices of the survivors who’d been there a scant hour earlier talking to each other, and also the exact same sounds they’d made moving around—it was a complete reenactment of the past.

Then the sound of shoveling finished, a prayer chanted in the sheriff’s voice faded, and Officer Weizmann’s urged, “Okay, let’s go.” At the same time, another voice that the two lawmen hadn’t heard also replayed. It was a deep, deep, mocking sort of tone of pure delight. One thing alone was for certain: the source of that voice wasn’t human. No human being could laugh like that.

Shortly thereafter, three sets of footsteps echoed from the ground as they

started off across the wasteland.

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"They're following us, just like I thought, the lousy pests," said a hoarse voice. It came from the vicinity of D's left hip. There was nothing there but his left hand.

The voice continued its harangue, saying, "This is partly your fault, you know. You're the one who made that worthless bunch do it. You never should've told 'em it was dangerous out here. Talk about being completely out of luck. Those clowns think they were spared the hell of dying in a crash, and now they're jumping into a different kind of hell. It's a million times more dangerous out here."

D pressed ahead, not saying a word.

As evening approached, the wind twined around the cooling light so it might sneak its chill into the people even through their eyes. That alone would've made it hard enough for a living creature to survive until morning, but this was no ordinary wasteland.

Shortly after, the hoarse voice inquired, "You hear that?"

There was no reply. That was as good as an affirmation.

"Why, that's—a flute. My! Above us and below, to our left and right, I can hear it coming from every possible direction. There must be enough people playing to start a damn orchestra."

"There are only two," D said simply.

"That can't be!" the hoarse voice replied, and then it fell silent, adding a second later, "You're right. You really are one scary character, you know that? Sure as hell, you're the only one who could do a job like *this* out here in the Playground, where your horse got gobbled up as soon as we entered the place."

"How far is the fortress?"

"Another fifty miles. We should get there tomorrow. Of course, the real trouble will just be starting then." Chortling, the hoarse voice added, "Those clowns will be better off if they die along the way."

The voice stopped.

D had halted. Even in the midday sun, his beautiful visage remained icy cold, and he kept it pointed straight ahead.

“The sound of their footsteps has disappeared,” the hoarse voice was heard to say.

The man’s black hair fluttered in the wind like the lush grass of the prairies.

“So, what are you gonna do? You planning on going to save ’em?”

Before the voice had finished teasing D, the Hunter’s boots began treading the ground before him again.

ENEMY SIGHTED IN THE PLAYGROUND

CHAPTER 2

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I

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Everyone saw the man who'd identified himself as D stop. But then he didn't move another muscle. He simply stood still, like a gorgeous piece of sculpture. In spite of themselves, they too halted.

"Something ain't right," Jan said, tilting his head to one side. His right hand was going for the broadsword on his belt. "Don't move. I'm just gonna ask him a few questions," he said, taking a couple of steps.

"You stay here," the sheriff said, clapping a hand on the mobster's shoulder as he stepped forward. "This is *my*job. Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

The sheriff seemed to be fighting the wind as he dragged his massive form up behind D.

"Hey, is there something—"

Right in front of him, D turned. The sheriff's eyes bulged in their sockets.

D didn't have a face. Beneath his traveler's hat was a gaping hole; not even his hair could be seen. A heartbeat later, the sheriff saw some sort of purplish mass shoot out of the hole. The thing split into countless purple tentacles that assailed the group behind him. There was no time to run or even to dodge them, so great was their speed. Wrapping around everyone's torsos, they pulled tight with a strength that threatened to tear them apart. Maria's face quickly turned blue from cyanosis. Weizmann groaned, and Jan found his arm crushed against his torso just as he was about to raise his sword.

Overhead, a black shape soaked up the sunlight as it zipped along. One of the tentacles coiled, trying to catch hold of it. It was rebuffed instead. A second and third entered the fray. Deftly averting them, an arrow of black iron flew with supersonic speed at D's face, piercing the center of the writhing mass of tentacles. Reeling back without a sound, D tried to extricate the arrow with both

hands, but it wouldn't budge. The tentacles had already released the people. It was obvious that they danced in the throes of death at the bidding of their host.

When D finally fell over, one of the men avoided the still-twitching tentacles and went over to him. It was Bierce. Obviously the deadly arrows that had pierced D had been unleashed by him in midair. Like the others, he'd had both arms tied up by the tentacles, which now twitched on the ground in numerous pieces. They'd been torn apart. The question was, *how*?

The warrior looked down sternly at D in his death throes.

Just then, Jan came over clutching his throat and cursed, "That son of a bitch was lying when he said he was a Vampire Hunter. Damned if he wasn't one of the monsters!"

"No, it's not him."

"What?" Jan exclaimed, and he wasn't the only one with the wrathful look of a demon on his face.

"He was different somehow. Somewhere along the line we got duped. By more of these things, I guess."

"These things? What the hell are they?"

"*Things* is the only way I can describe them. Looks like those aerial photos didn't catch all the strange stuff on the ground. Are all of you okay?" Bierce said to the group behind Jan.

"Yeah. I'll survive."

"Keep the Stows and the kid back there," the warrior told them.

"Why—"

"Looks like this guy isn't all right."

Following Bierce's gaze, Jan flinched, and then immediately let out a gagging sound.

The massive form of the sheriff lay on the ground. Rather than strangling him, their foe had chosen to do something else. His head, ripped from his broad shoulders, sat on the ground about a foot and a half closer to the two men than

the lawman's body. It was facing them.

"Wish we could bury him, but we don't have the time. We can have a funeral for him later. If we make it, that is."

"You'll jinx us with talk like that," Jan said, his body seeming to quiver with a sort of helplessness.

"You scared?"

"Hell, yeah. I can take care of myself against humans, but I'm no good when it comes to monsters."

The warrior grinned wryly. "Well, at least you're honest."

"That's my best point. We're counting on you now, you old warrior. You're our only hope." When the mobster looked back at the rest of the party, his face was indeed pale. "At any rate, let's get going."

The two men began to walk back to the rest of the party. Everyone was facing them. Weizmann, the Stows, Maria—their expressions all changed suddenly. The instant he recognized it as a look of fear, Bierce twisted his upper body around. He raised the arrow he still held in his left hand. But he didn't get a chance to throw it.

Behind him stood the faceless D. His wounds hadn't been fatal. However, his body was enveloped in white smoke, and the tentacles that spilled from the hole in his face rained down on the ground. The broken tentacles had started to dissolve. A stark, silvery tip protruded from the chest of his black coat.

When the body began to melt away and collapse as if it were hollow, the two of them saw the young man in black who stood there with naked steel in hand. This was the real one.

Such awe and terror coursed through Jan's body that he literally shook. But he didn't even know what sort of terror it was.

"We're saved . . ." the mobster said, somehow managing to keep his knees from buckling.

"You came back?" Bierce asked, returning the arrow to his quiver and ignoring Jan.

“I kept right on going and ended up here,” D replied, sheathing his blade. And then, before Bierce could open his mouth again, the Hunter turned his back to him and started to walk away.

“Wait,” Transport Officer Weizmann called out shrilly as he ran over to block D’s path. He’d given Franz Stow the suckling’s rope and a pistol to cover him. “I’m responsible for this group. I can’t allow you to behave in such a self-centered manner.”

“I’m just passing through,” D said without halting.

With that, the officer from the Capital backed away, saying, “There’s no telling what’s out there. It’s too dangerous to move around haphazardly.”

“Then stay here.”

“Forget about him, officer,” Bierce said in a resigned tone. “He’s a whole different breed from us. Let him go. All we have to do is follow along behind him.”

“I can’t do that. I’m a public servant. And all your lives are my responsibility.”

“So that means we’re all supposed to take orders from you, Mr. High-and-Mighty?” Jan sneered.

“You got something to say, you son of a bitch?” the transport officer snarled, taking a big leap back. Covering more than ten feet, the jump even drew a small gasp from Bierce. And as Weizmann landed, he trained the threatening implement that had hung by his hip on D. Six thick barrels, each seemingly twenty millimeters in diameter, surrounded the center barrel of what appeared to be a .50 caliber gun. The ammo belt ran back into the cylinder on his back, which looked to hold an incredible fifty thousand rounds. The load that looked awkward on such a delicate man turned out to be a magazine.

As Bierce let out a gasp of admiration, beside him Jan’s face went pale.

“Hey, knock it off, man. I mean, *delivery boy*. Try talking this over, okay?”

Anyone who knew D would’ve closed his eyes at this point, easily able to imagine the scene that was going to play out. This gorgeous young man didn’t allow anyone to turn a weapon on him.

However, the situation took an unexpected turn.

D halted.

“Huh?” Jan exclaimed, his eyes going wide—apparently he’d pictured a deadly scene that was quite different.

D remained motionless.

The officer was perplexed. Though he had a terrible weapon leveled at the Hunter, the vision of beauty before him gave off such an eerie aura the officer forgot himself—he never would’ve thought the Hunter would face him empty handed. Weizmann’s fist was clenched, but he forgot to put enough power into his index finger to pull the trigger.

D then raised his right hand.

“What in the—” the transport officer cried, hugging his weapon close.

“Don’t!” Jan shouted. They were dealing with D here. But now he pictured the young man being torn to shreds by gunfire.

A black-gloved hand was slowly reaching for the hilt of his longsword.

“Don’t do it! I’ll shoot!” Weizmann shouted at him. His face was masked in sweat. His finger had the trigger squeezed back almost to the limit. The intensity of the unearthly air that linked him and D threatened to knock the officer unconscious.

D’s hand went for his weapon’s hilt. The ghastly air roiled from him like smoke from an explosion. Jan snorted and drew his broadsword, while the transport officer could only hang his head.

The bullets didn’t fly.

As D silently took his hand away from his sword’s hilt, everyone watched him as if frozen. The Hunter began to walk away. This time the transport officer didn’t stop him. He’d lost all desire to do so.

“That was pathetic. That’s why you’re just a snot-nosed kid,” Jan spat at the stiffened officer, managing to hide his own trembling.

Turning, he continued frankly, “Okay, let’s get going. We can leave our fearless

leader here.”

And with that, he started to walk away.

Fingers like steel sank into Jan’s shoulder. The pain was so great he couldn’t even cry out.

“What’ll we do, officer?” Bierce inquired.

As if these words had broken the spell over him, Weizmann lowered his weapon and reeled a little.

“Here I thought you were just a young fella with a short fuse. I’m glad you didn’t shoot,” Bierce said with a smile.

“Of course I didn’t. I’m a police officer.”

“You only shoot when you’re gonna be shot, then? So, what do we do?”

Wiping the sweat from his face, Weizmann looked up at the sky. The blue was deepening. Night would probably set upon them without any twilight.

“Let’s keep going like we were. For the time being, we’ll follow after him.”

“*For the time being*, eh?”

“Yes, for the time being. It’s my opinion that he’s headed in the same direction we are.”

“I’ll second that,” the warrior said with a nod, and Jan spat on the ground.

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II

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At some point, the wasteland had become a valley. They hadn’t noticed it because of the fog that had sprung up some time ago. Though they all exchanged nervous glances, D melted into the milky whiteness as he advanced ahead of them confidently, and it was all they could do just to keep from losing sight of him. Suspicions that he might transform into a monster like that thing they saw earlier flitted through their minds, but they couldn’t think of anything else to do, so they just kept following along after the vision of beauty.

The next thing they knew they were going down a gentle slope, and when they reached the bottom, all they could see was sheer cliffs. To their left ran a broad, silvery flow. The stream through the valley coursed rather swiftly, baring foamy tusks when it struck the rocks along its banks. When walking close to it, the members of the group found not only their legs dampened by the droplets of spray but their faces as well.

“Come on, let’s take a little break already,” Maria called up to Weizmann, who was at the forefront of the party. “Mr. Stow can’t keep this up, and the kid’s not doing so well, either.”

She was actually helping the old woman by lending her a shoulder to lean on. For the last hour, the elderly man and the boy had also been showing signs of exhaustion.

Jan, who’d been covering the rear, ran over and caught Toto by the shoulder as the boy began to wobble then dropped down into a squat.

“Damned kid. That’s what you get for playing tough. Okay, climb up here,” he said, presenting his back to the boy.

Turning his face away in a snit, the boy started to walk off. Time and again Jan had offered to help, and each time the boy had refused with the same attitude. After two or three steps, he fell.

Racing over, Jan scooped him up and said, “You should’ve said something. Look, I know you don’t like me, but having you falling all over the place will just slow us down. We’re bringing you along, whether you like it or not. Now climb up here.”

No sooner had he forced the boy onto his back than Franz, who was standing right in front of him, collapsed.

“This ain’t good. Hey, delivery boy!” he yelled to the officer, but Weizmann was in charge of the suckling. He was in no position to lend a shoulder to the elderly man.

Merely glaring back at the mobster, he shouted to the blurry figure up ahead, “Hey, D—I need to talk to you!”

This accomplished nothing. The figure of unearthly beauty grew fainter,

dwindling in the fog.

“Officer, do you have any money?” Bierce asked.

“Money? I’ve got some to cover expenses while I bring this clown in.”

“How much?”

“A good five thousand dalas.”

“I can’t say that it’ll be enough, but it’s better than losing our guide. Hey, D!” the warrior called into the mysterious fog. “It seems Officer Weizmann wants to hire you.”

The man in question, shocked, was about to say something when the warrior told him, “Well, you don’t want that suckling to get away, do you?

“Your pay will be four thousand dalas. We want you to take care of a Noble lady in waiting who’s after the transport officer. Apparently she’s gonna try to bump him off.”

The warrior finished saying this before Weizmann could interrupt him, and then focused his gaze up ahead. Apparently the others had heard as well, because they all had the same intent look in their eyes.

The fog continued to eddy, and there was no response from D. It looked as if the fog had swallowed the warrior’s words up, and weariness and discouragement spread across the faces of all.

Just then, D appeared less than five yards from Bierce. A stir went through the group.

“Okay, time to talk business. Make this work,” Bierce said, giving the officer’s back a push. “I’ll take this guy from you.”

Though the warrior reached for the suckling’s rope, Weizmann knocked his hand away. He didn’t want anyone else doing his job.

“The state of affairs is just as he described. Will you take the job?”

“On two conditions,” D said.

“What?”

“I have work up ahead. That gets taken care of first.”

“I suppose that’s okay,” the transport officer replied with an unenthusiastic nod.

“One other thing—payment in advance,” D said.

An expression of relief skimmed across the officer’s face. Still gripping the suckling’s rope, he took a purse from his pocket and put four of the thousand-dala coins in D’s left hand. “Wha—” the officer exclaimed, eyes bulging.

“What is it?” Bierce asked, an inquisitive look on his face, but the officer replied that it was nothing and put his change purse away.

Letting out a breath, he said, “The sun will be going down soon. We’ll have to camp out. Watch over all of us.”

“I signed on to slay a Noble maidservant out to get you,” D replied.

“Yes, but she said she’d kill everyone around me. They’re all in danger.”

Bierce had to fight the urge to grin. He found it a very clever plan.

“The deal’s off,” D said, putting his hand into his coat pocket. Four thousand dalas wasn’t nearly enough.

“Wait! If you get us safely to the Capital, you’ll be paid more. From the state treasury. Guaranteed.”

D held his arm out, and glittering bits fell to the ground with a mellifluous sound. Gold coins. He turned his back to them without another word.

“Wait!” Weizmann called out to him, but there was nothing more he could do.

“Excuse me . . .”

Though the voice sounded as if it might’ve been obliterated by the wind, it seemed to have reached D’s ears.

The Hunter halted and turned.

“Hey, now!”

“Now, just a—”

Jan and Maria had called out in surprise. Squatting, Jan let the boy Toto climb down. He’d started squirming on the mobster’s back. His frail legs still seemed

exhausted, and they looked terribly unreliable as he began to walk. The boy went a step closer to D than the transport officer.

"Here—add this to the payment," Toto said, raising his little fist.

Gorgeous dark eyes of unfathomable depth caught the copper coin that rested on the boy's soft palm.

"Sheesh! Ten dalas!" Jan remarked with disgust, but his words became a cry of pain. Maria had driven her elbow into his solar plexus. Her face was tinged with strong emotion.

The black-gloved hand overlapped with the small, pale one. When it came away again, the copper coin was gone.

"And for that—take care of everybody," the boy mumbled. He was a little tongue tied. He hadn't opened his mouth enough.

"You have a deal," D replied.

None of them understood the miracle that had just occurred.

"Kid . . ." Maria muttered in a low voice. A silvery-haired figure left her side and gave Toto a hug. It was Mrs. Stow.

"This child . . . asked him to look out for us . . ."

Tears streamed from the old woman's eyes, dampening the boy's hair. Quickly touching his hand to the spot, their little savior looked up into this strange rain with an expression that suggested he was about to break down and cry. The old woman hugged him again.

D said, "This path doesn't lead to the road to the Capital."

It was a surprising remark.

"Th—then why the hell are we headed this way?" Jan sputtered, but there was really no point in complaining, since they'd taken it upon themselves to follow D.

"I thought I made it clear I had business out here. If you have a problem with that, we can call this off."

"Okay, okay, you've made your point."

"Can I ask you something?" Bierce inquired, raising one hand. "What's out

there?”

“An old fortress.”

“A fortress?”

Apparently this was news to Bierce, who cocked his head to one side. The rest of the group exchanged glances, but of course they didn’t know anything either.

“So tell us about it,” Officer Weizmann said, leaning forward. Essentially, he was the Hunter’s employer, and that accounted for his arrogant tone.

“Once, this whole region was a ‘playground’ for the Nobility,” D began to explain. The name had survived into the present day, but all who knew how it’d actually been in antiquity had since turned to dust. All that remained of the original Playground was part of a research facility that was also a shrine. Ten thousand years earlier, the Sacred Ancestor’s troops had come down on the Nobles who controlled the region. They smashed through the net of defenses, until about three hundred surviving Nobles were left holed up in some ruins. Though they were outnumbered and outgunned, they had something else on their side: faith.

“Don’t imagine that the Sacred Ancestor was the only god the Nobles worshiped,” D told his rapt audience. “They believed in their own personal deities. But the ones who sought shelter out here worshiped a god that was unlike anything else. Against these three hundred or so Nobles was a force of thirty thousand—yet it took them thirteen months to take the fortress, thanks to that god. The Sacred Ancestor’s army destroyed all who’d found refuge there and, it is said, laid utter waste to these lands and the fortress, but for some reason it seems the fortress remains.”

“And that god—was it destroyed along with the Nobles?” Mr. Stow inquired with great trepidation. His face, covered with wrinkles and age spots, wore an earnest expression. When a person was this close to the end of his days, he became interested in any kind of god.

“I don’t know,” D replied. “But part of the Playground that was supposedly annihilated remains operational.”

“Would that be that thing—the thing that made itself look like you?” Jan

asked, snarling like a beast.

In a hopeful tone, the complete opposite of Jan's growl, the old man said, "Then, the Nobles' god is still . . ." His body quivered.

Jan didn't seem to like this one bit. "What are you sounding so happy about, old-timer? You saw that last monster, didn't you? The god is that thing's boss. Something like that might still be around. It'd gobble us up in a second."

"Even with that god on their side, the besieged Nobles couldn't win?" Bierce asked while rewinding his crimson scarf.

"Not in the end," D said.

"So, what are you going to do there?"

Not responding to Maria's question, the Hunter said, "The sun will be going down soon. I know you're tired, but we have to set up camp."

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Setting up camp consisted of lighting the portable atomic lamp they'd taken from the aircraft and staying huddled around it; that was all they could manage. The fog lifted, and they could see each other clearly. Fortunately, the atomic lamp generated sufficient heat in a fifty-yard radius.

Noticing Bierce sitting against a rock with his eyes closed as she came back from washing her face at the riverbank, Maria walked over, stealing a glance at D standing in the distance.

"Say, you know something about that Hunter, don't you?"

Without looking up at her, Bierce replied, "There's nobody in my line of work who doesn't know about him."

"He's that famous?"

"He's a dhampir, with human and Noble blood—so he's both human and Noble, yet neither human nor Noble."

Maria looked surprised. She said, "That sounds pretty deep."

Her tone was rather pensive, and she quickly donned an unsettled look and asked, "When he came out of the fog earlier, did you notice something? The fog

parted right down the middle."

"He's that sort of man. Even the fog would want to do what she could for him."

Maria gave the warrior a look that seemed to ask, *What are you talking about, you idiot?* as she said, "I never thought of the fog as being a woman."

"I saw something weird, too."

"Oh?"

"Weizmann must've seen it as well. When he gave him his advance, D took it with his left hand."

"You're right—does that mean he's a southpaw?"

"He keeps his right hand free so if anything comes up, he can go for his weapon fast," the warrior said, giving Maria a cold glance before he crinkled his brow. "But it looked like the palm of D's hand smiled."

"What?"

"A human face formed in it and grinned—I'm certain of it."

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III

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The elderly couple, Toto, and Maria nodded off, in that order. Jan and Transport Officer Weizmann were fast asleep. The suckling's head drooped—D alone stood some distance from the glow of the atomic lamp, but down by his feet someone called out to him.

"Well, that's a dhampir for you. The night's your element," said Bierce the warrior, his upper body propped up against a smallish boulder. "I haven't thanked you yet for saving us today, have I?"

D was silent. Perhaps that was his way of saying such pleasantries were unnecessary.

"Well, I'm saying it now. Thank you."

Staring at the man as he bowed his head a bit, the Hunter remarked, “You’re ready to call it quits, aren’t you?”

After his stunned look, a wry grin surfaced on Bierce’s face. “You mean because it’s not like a warrior to go thanking people left, right, and center? Yeah, you’re right.”

Bierce chopped at the back of his neck with the edge of his hand.

“I’ll be forty this year. A cyborg horse is more my style, but I got on that skybus because I’d taken a job as a guard in the Capital. It’s nice having your freedom, but that’s a young man’s game. When you get older, it’s best to settle down to some quiet pasture. Hmm . . . I don’t suppose a dhampir like you could understand that, though.”

“There are old people and a child,” D said. “They’re asleep now, exhausted. But they’ve all been depending on you, haven’t they?”

Bierce said nothing.

“Because they thought you were a warrior. And that you’d be a lifeline, there to save them if they needed you.”

The old woman had leaned on Maria’s shoulder, and the boy had ridden on Jan’s back. Even though Bierce had to be tougher than any of them, he hadn’t been asked to help.

“Sorry. Their lifeline is a piece of junk,” Bierce said in a self-deprecating manner. “When they wake up, I’ll carry the kid.”

“If you call yourself a warrior, you’ve got better things to do.”

When D said this, Bierce leapt to his feet.

“Finally time for the real deal?”

Slinging the quiver of arrows that rested by his right arm across his back, he put his longsword on his hip. His movements were quick, without the slightest pause.

In the meantime, D woke those who were sleeping. It wasn’t clear just how he did it; he merely had to lay one hand on the shoulder of each and they were wide awake.

“What is it?” the transport officer asked.

“The enemy. Take cover behind that rock.”

As soon as D spoke, the officer raced over to the suckling and coiled the rope that had been tied to a rock around his hand instead.

On seeing Bierce with iron arrows between the fingers of his right hand, Jan shuddered. It was fighter’s nerves.

“So, the fuckers are coming? I want a piece of ’em, too,” the mobster said, tucking his broadsword through his belt.

“The enemy numbers five,” Bierce said. His eyes were closed. He must’ve listened for their footsteps.

“I’ll take them.”

Everyone’s eyes focused on a spot where nothing but those words remained. D was already headed for the water’s edge. Without hesitating, he stepped into the depths. Knowing that running water was the nemesis of those with Noble blood, Bierce got a gleam in his eyes.

Though fairly swift, the current didn’t budge the Hunter an inch as he went out into the middle and turned upstream. The water rose to his waist.

Out of the fog and darkness, five figures came gliding across the water’s surface. They halted five yards from D. Apparently they, too, were unaffected by the current. This was thanks to the gold disks their boots rested on. About a foot in diameter, they allowed their rider to move like a whirligig beetle, and as they now demonstrated, they also gave a person total control even in the fiercest current. The five halted only for an instant, and then glided across the water’s surface to form a ring around D. All of them wore golden armor and helmets. Four were armed with long spears, while the fifth held a laser gun.

“So, someone to play with after all this time?” the armored figure facing D said with relish. His golden cape swayed in the night breeze. “I’m sure you must know what this place is—so you’re either very unlucky or very stupid.” Staring at the people by the shore, he said, “There are a few more over there, I see. We’ll have to round them up and get them to join us in some mermaid hunting. Like so!”

From a pouch at the waist of his armor he pulled out something like a minnow and threw the thrashing little thing into the water. Suddenly it became a giant, six-foot-long fish that tried to swim away. A stark flash of light from his armored right hand tied him and the water together. Perhaps D alone saw the thrust he'd made with ungodly speed. Kicking up a tremendous spray, the gigantic fish and the long spear that pierced it were raised high.

"It hurts! It hurts so much!" said a human voice.

Maria and Mrs. Stow screamed. But they hadn't seen the worst. As the armored figure turned the fish toward them with a little chuckle, they saw the face of a human girl writhing in the throes of death.

Raising the twitching body high, the armored figure laughed, "This is what we mean by 'mermaid hunting.' There's 'were-tiger hunting,' as well. Tigers or fish—which will it be?" His laughter swelled into something louder and more malevolent.

But then another voice rang out, soft yet strong and cold, saying, "I know something else, too."

The figure's laughter stopped dead.

"What?"

"This."

At that moment, the gorgeous figure in black pounced. Perhaps it was his beauty that mesmerized the armored man.

When a blade whizzed down and sliced through their compatriot's helm, cleaving him down to the ribs, the others became masses of murderous intent and leveled their spears. The laser marksman who'd dropped back a pace raised his weapon to his shoulder. A crimson arrow penetrated his throat, going in through the left side and jabbing out from the right.

Not even glancing at their companion as he fell, the remaining three squared off against D, blasting rays of blistering heat into the sky all the while. They knew there was no way they could defeat their opponent if they flew off the handle. The way they adjusted their stance and lowered their center of gravity as they readied their spears was so skillful and precise, it left Bierce paralyzed as he

prepared to loose a second arrow.

D sank down. His blade was horizontal, at eye level, the tip pointed ever so slightly down as the flowing water hid him up to the elbow. The stark blade then vanished from the trio's view. As did the Hunter.

The four attackers halted in the river like four stones in human form.

Jan coughed, and Maria held Toto tight. Even the suckling was frozen.

The figure that came flying at the Hunter with fog trailing behind him was the opponent who'd been behind D and to his left. As it flew through the air, his spear was every bit as swift as the first man's had been. The water parted by D's hand. A sword blade appeared and batted away the long spear, then limned an arc overhead, following which the body of D's foe hit the water some ten feet away, split open from the crotch all the way to the right lung as it sank. But before it did, the weapons with which the remaining two struck—one from behind the Hunter and to the right, the other head on—were easily knocked away, and as the attackers were left off balance, flashes of light ruthlessly carved through their chests.

Changing the spot where he stood ever so slightly, the young man was still poised for action, while behind him, five black streaks flowed away.

Sheathing his daunting blade without wiping it or flicking it clean, D climbed out of the water, where he was greeted not by cheers, but by a deathly silence. His battle, which was beyond human ken, had left the others chilled—but that wasn't what their eyes or their faces said. They had seen D as he really was.

He told the people who were dazedly staring at him, "There's no way to be certain more won't be coming. We're leaving."

"That's crazy!" Jan shouted in protest, pointing to the aged couple. "Look at them! Those two can't make it another step. I'm beat, and so is everyone else. Before those clowns' friends could get us, we'd die of fatigue."

"He's right," Bierce said in the mobster's support. "And it's ten times harder walking at night than it is by day. Even if we carry the old folks and the kid, it'll really slow us down."

"I want the men to come with me."

With this odd remark, D walked toward the cliff. Following him without a clue what was going on, Jan gasped. There was a small patch of cylindrical plants about six feet tall growing beneath the cliff.

“What, you thinking about making a raft?” Jan said, his eyes going wide. “These trees will float all right, but they’re so hard you couldn’t cut into ’em with an ax. Not that we even have an ax in the first place.”

Arms extended, he was shrugging his shoulders when a stark white flash blazed before him.

“Huh?”

There was just a single flash—and without a backward glance at the cylindrical stalks hitting the ground, D headed off toward the next source of building materials.

FORTRESS OF DEATH

CHAPTER 3

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I

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The raft was assembled in about two hours—basically, it was all D's show. For plants that were supposedly buoyant they were strangely heavy, and while Jan and Weizmann together could barely move one, D lifted them easily with one hand and bound them together with the extremely fine wire he carried. Bierce tried to squeeze a finger into the space between the cylindrical logs, but they wouldn't budge an inch, and when he tried the same with an arrowhead, he couldn't get it in even a millimeter.

"Talk about strength," the experienced warrior said, clucking his tongue with amazement.

Everyone carried the raft over to the river and climbed aboard. D then cut the wire tied to a rock on shore, and the raft glided away.

A heavy anxiety clung to all of them. Perhaps realizing as much, Jan asked, "Say, Mr. D, what were those things in the armor earlier?"

"Illusions of the Nobility."

Everyone turned in his direction.

"Illusions? You hacked them up, and they bled and everything!"

"Illusions can bleed, too. If they're Nobles."

"But no one's heard any talk of them still being in this area for thousands of years."

"That's why he said they're illusions," Bierce interjected. "From what I hear, this whole area used to be a playground for the Nobility. They altered human beings in all sorts of ways and had fun hunting them. Did their god tell 'em to do it? Or was it just some new form of human sacrifice?"

The warrior's last two questions were directed at D.

There was no reply. Like a gorgeous darkness, the young man stood still in the center of the raft, becoming one with the night.

An hour passed without incident. All of them had begun to think that perhaps they could keep drifting like that all the way to a safe place. Toto and the aged couple dropped off to sleep.

D suddenly shifted his eyes from side to side.

“What is it?” Bierce inquired. He was the only other one awake.

“They’re coming from both sides. At least twenty riders on either bank.”

Though Bierce strained to hear, only the sound of the wind struck his eardrums. However, if that was what the dashing young man before him said, it had to be true.

“For all your skill with a blade, you can’t reach the shore from here,” the warrior said, a confident smile splitting his bearded face. “I still can’t see our enemy or hear their mounts, but I want you to leave ’em to me.”

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It was about five minutes later that the echoes of iron-shod hooves rang out. Unlike their earlier opponents, these men wore black capes and galloped on dark steeds. Each and every figure was outlined in pale blue flames. The men’s hair was ablaze, as were the manes and fetlocks of their mounts.

Perhaps they heard the thunder of those hoofbeats, or maybe they sensed the danger, but everyone on the raft woke up—and D walked over to one side. Spotting the horses and riders now running even with the raft, Jan got to his feet with a look of excitement on his face.

“So, those fuckers have come after us again—well, just tell me what to do!” the mobster said, his hand reaching for his broadsword.

“Just one thing,” D said.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Duck.”

“Huh?”

D kicked the man's shin. Tumbling backward with a cry, Jan grabbed his leg while shouting, "What the hell did you do *that* >for?"

His scream was punctured by something whistling through the wind. Looking at it, Jan gasped. An arrow shrouded in blue flames had halted in midair. D's hand was wrapped around it.

Blue arrows rained down on the raft from all sides.

"Stay down."

Saying only this, D walked across the tiny craft without making a sound. His right hand flashed into action. A lone sword was all he had—but each time it moved, every approaching arrow fell.

"That's a hell of a thing," Bierce groaned in admiration.

"I'll say. He's cutting them all down!"

"No, only the ones that would've hit someone."

"What?" the mobster exclaimed.

"That's what's so incredible. Follow his lead."

"You've gotta be kidding. I couldn't manage that for the life of me."

"Then how about this?"

After batting away two incoming arrows with the crimson arrows in his hands, Bierce raised them up so they crossed over his head. His eyes were closed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jan shouted.

Bierce, seeming to take this as his signal, swung both arms around. Four arrows were clutched between the fingers of each hand. His crimson arrows zipped out between the blue ones. Four blazing riders galloping on either bank dropped from their mounts.

"Buddy, that's pretty awesome!" Jan cried out in the fever of battle. The old warrior had batted down the enemy's arrows, and pierced their foes with each of his own. The raft had impenetrable defenses and a flawless offensive.

When eight more of their opponents had dropped from their horses, D said, "They've multiplied."

There was the sound of pounding against the ground as the pale blue mounts and riders once again rode even with the raft. Blue arrows fell from the sky like rain.

“There’s just no end to it!” Weizmann wailed.

When a black-gloved hand tapped him on the shoulder, the transport officer turned a stunned look at the inhumanly beautiful countenance while D pointed at the cliff to their right.

“Drop that,” he said.

About a hundred yards ahead of the galloping riders, there was a knotlike protrusion halfway up the face of the cliff. An outcropping of rock.

“I got you,” the officer said, but as he stood up he was jerked to one side by his collar, allowing an arrow to pass before he was let go again.

“I leave it to you, then,” the Hunter said.

Weizmann’s whole body tensed. The fight burned in him.

“Keep an eye on the suckling for me,” he said, raising his beloved motor gun. The twelve-pound mass of metal seemed like a crushing weight to his shoulder, arm, and legs. For sighting purposes it simply had a little piece of iron, notched to make a primitive crosshairs. The weapon was primarily intended to spray bullets at close range and mow down the enemy. It didn’t have the precision of a long-range scope.

A stream of fire and a deafening report flew from the moving raft. Twelve-millimeter explosive rounds hammered the base of the rock outcropping. Ten yards ahead of the madly charging riders, the chunk of rock dropped from thirty yards above them, its tremendous mass crushing a dozen or more steeds in the vanguard and as many men. When the terrific impact rocked the water, and fragments of the rock sent up splashes, the riders on either shore not surprisingly halted, and the raft left them behind.

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Though the eastern sky was brightening like water, the river’s flow grew no gentler. Aside from D, almost everyone on the raft, including Bierce, had

dropped off to sleep, but Jan was sulking.

"Sheesh, they all ignored me. Hell, I can handle myself better than the average guy. I might not be a Hunter or a warrior, but I want a chance to strut my stuff. They'd better remember they've got a real man here."

As he grumbled, the mobster kept his voice low so that D wouldn't hear it while skillfully using an oar to avoid rocks and rapids. But the young hoodlum had had all he could take.

It was then that his ears caught a thin thread of sound that he realized was most definitely a voice.

I know just how you feel, it said.

What the hell? the mobster intended to shout and leap to his feet, but he only grunted a puzzled sound and moved slightly. For some reason, he got the feeling he had to restrain himself.

Just as he was thinking his ears had been playing tricks on him, the voice continued, *I understand your dissatisfaction. They can only ignore you for so long. Would you like to tell me about it?*

"Who the hell are you?"

Shhhhh.

As the voice said this to him, Jan opened his eyes. Instinctively he looked at D. Their eyes met. He hurriedly looked away.

"Was I dreaming?" he muttered. Looking around, he didn't see a single sign that anyone else was awake.

"What a weird dream," he said, closing his eyes and trying to get back to sleep. Though he didn't hear the strange voice again, Jan was somewhat surprised to realize that he *wanted* to hear it. At the same time, an intense hatred reared its head. The voice understood about D and that freaking Bierce, not to mention the transport officer. *He* got to show off, and he was still a damned kid!

Jan tried to sleep. His efforts were successful. The anger that had left him ready to scream had been quelled by the voice he'd just heard, thin but brimming with affection.

I understand. I can help you.

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"Something's bothering me," a low, hoarse voice griped. It was so faint the others wouldn't have heard it over the sound of the river.

"What's that?" D asked, swiftly pushing the oar against an approaching rock to redirect the raft.

"From what I've seen, we've got two weirdoes here. The kid and the suckling. Neither one's normal."

"What's different about them?"

"I'm not too sure about the kid, but he seems to be carrying a heavy load. Until he gets rid of it, he'll be living under a cloud."

"And the other one?"

"Him—he's dangerous," the hoarse voice said quite plainly. "Up until now, he's come off as an ordinary suckling. The fact that the transport officer's still doing okay after the sheriff died is proof of that. But there's a danger in him you don't find in your average suckling. There's something unsettling about him. You must've noticed it too. It'll be daytime soon, when you'll be at your weakest. Whatever you do, don't let your guard down."

There were faint traces of haggardness to be seen in D's handsome features.

"Oh, my," the hoarse voice said, sounding surprised. "The current has weakened. Guess we're just about there. At this rate, we should arrive in an hour."

"If all goes well."

And saying this, D turned around and looked overhead. His eyes alone would find that, in the far reaches of the clear but still pale heavens, there hung countless black specks.

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II

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By the time these specks became four-winged demon birds that assailed the raft, everyone aboard was awake and braced to counterattack. With wings over three feet long, the birds had beaks like pickaxes and four legs with four toes each for a total of sixteen talons. The wind their wings created left innumerable ripples on the water's surface.

When they dove down, Weizmann opened fire on them with the motor gun. As the fusillade of explosive rounds made contact with the bodies of the great birds, the bullets created preposterously large holes, tearing them into pieces that plummeted into the river. The water was stained red.

Once they made it past the hail of bullets, they were greeted by D's sword and Bierce's arrows. One swipe of the blade decapitated the giant birds, while the arrows pierced even their ironlike beaks as if they were paper.

Before the flock of birds flew away more than a score of members shy, a dozen minutes of deadly combat had taken place.

"Anyone hurt?" Weizmann asked, but they all shook their heads.

His motor gun, D's sword, and Bierce's arrows had kept the enemy from achieving anything. Something resembling self-confidence seemed to emanate from the young transport officer.

"Looks like we managed to make it through," he said as he mopped his sweat.

Bierce replied, "It's still too early to celebrate. They've got things out hunting humans by day; they'll just keep coming. You think the Nobility are controlling 'em?"

The last question was directed at D.

"Programming for human hunting must've been put into their brains. There were operation scars on their heads."

"You could actually see that?" Bierce said, and not only his eyes, but also those of everyone who heard this, went wide.

"Excuse me," Maria said, pointing up at the sky. "Here they come again. They're carrying something. They plan on bombing us!"

Before she'd finished speaking, something whistled through the wind, and a great pillar of water went up not three feet from the right side of the raft. The waves surged toward them, making the raft pitch wildly. In order to both move quickly and keep the enemy from gaining a foothold, the raft was just big enough for the nine people. While it wasn't exactly tiny, it had difficulty with these great waves. Chunks of black rock continued to fall on all sides of them, and the group was assailed by the spray from the pillars of water that went up.

"You clumsy bastards can't hit us!" the soaked Jan jeered toward the sky.

Perhaps out of fear of Weizmann's motor gun, the birds conducted their bombardment from a high altitude, and fortunately their accuracy was extremely poor. D's skillful handling of the craft allowed the group to dodge all of the chunks of rock, with only one grazing the back end of the raft. However, as their foes carried five rocks each—one in their beaks, and another with each of their four feet—the onslaught showed no sign of ending. The raft pitched violently, and soaked from head to toe, Toto and the elderly couple began to vomit. They were seasick.

"Damn it, come in closer and fight us like men!" Jan said, shaking his fist as another pillar of water went up beside him, rocking the raft.

At the same time, something terrible happened. D and Bierce were both thrown off balance, and the others could only watch, their blood turning to ice, as the two men were swallowed by the raging current.

"Oh, damn!"

Though Jan and Maria each crawled over to where one of the men had gone in, there was no sign of them surfacing in the wake of the raft as it floated away.

Blasted with a gust of terror, Jan turned to Weizmann. Their last hope was the young man's motor gun. The mobster looked up. The shapes that'd been flying high above them were now steadily approaching.

"Here they come! Shoot 'em!"

With a strained look on his face, Weizmann raised his gun and pulled the trigger. Nothing came out.

"What's wrong?" Maria screamed.

“It’s malfunctioned! It won’t fire!”

“Give it to me, you fucking idiot!”

As Jan was about to run over, a fierce wind slammed down in front of him and an enormous shape landed like a fiend spreading his cape. The man’s nostrils were assailed by the stench of rotting meat.

“You—you son of a bitch!”

Narrowly dodging an artless strike by that pickax of a beak, Jan struck out with his broadsword as if to counter it. One of the monster bird’s two left wings was chopped halfway through at the base. Raising its severe beak, it let out a shriek.

Covering his ears, Jan crouched down. The old woman and Maria screamed.

Three more of the giant birds were coming down to land on the raft. The remaining dozen or so circled fifteen to twenty feet above them.

It was at that instant that two figures sprang up beside the raft. One of them zipped between the birds with unbelievable speed. Every time he passed one, there was a stark gleam, and the bird’s head went flying. Unlike Jan’s opponent, these fell without making a sound.

On seeing the danger, another bird started to take off, only to have its neck pierced by an iron arrow. The birds circling overhead also turned around. One flap of their wings started them in a sharp ascent. A roar and fiery streaks ripped their wings apart, pulverizing their heads and bodies.

“How in the world did you two . . .” Maria said in a stunned tone after watching the last of the birds fall on the left bank, her remark addressed to Bierce and D, who’d already sheathed his blade.

“You tricked me, didn’t you, you bastard?” Jan spat at Weizmann a minute later as the officer lowered the smoking motor gun.

“Don’t take it personally. I told those two how it would go. If we hadn’t pulled this, those things never would’ve come any closer.”

Weizmann was embellishing the story. Actually, it was D who had approached the transport officer and told him to feign trouble with his gun once they’d jumped overboard, and then wait for the birds to take the offensive.

“Shit!” Jan cursed again.

“Okay, it was a good plan, but let’s have no more of that stuff. This old lady looked like she was going to die,” Maria told them harshly, while down at her feet, Mrs. Stow sported lips that were purple and trembling.

“Bad news! She’s got a terrible fever,” Bierce said, knitting his brow as he put his hand against her forehead. “She’s old. If things go bad, she and her husband might both come down with pneumonia. We’ve gotta warm ’em up. Get the raft to shore.”

D didn’t reply. He simply stared straight ahead.

“Hey!” Jan snapped in an angry tone.

D gave a toss of his chin in the direction they were headed. Something white was moving toward them. A bank of fog. But the sky was clear.

“We’ll be there soon. Beyond that fog lies the fortress.”

Though D’s tone was the same as always, his words sent ice water down their spines.

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The raft floated into the fog without incident. It was so dense, the fog of the previous night couldn’t begin to compare. Maria held a handkerchief over her mouth and nose in spite of herself. She had the feeling they were drifting through a poisonous cloud.

The whiteness filled their field of view, erasing the shore and the cliffs. The only sound was that of the water. Everyone was staring at D—though they could only make out a faint figure. In addition to helplessness, this time their eyes also held anger. Though they’d agreed to the condition D had stated—that he would take

care of his job first—now that the fog had robbed them of their vision, leaving them uncertain of where they were headed, it was only human to blame him for leading them to such a place. The only ones who remained calm were D and Bierce.

Ten minutes passed. Then twenty.

"Hey, I'm not kidding. If we don't do something for her, this old lady's in serious trouble!" Jan shouted out, but his words were swallowed by a black hole that appeared unexpectedly.

"Where are we?" Mr. Stow asked in a frail voice.

"We've entered the fortress's waterway. We'll be landing soon," D responded.

Jan and Maria cheered at this.

"Well, we're going ashore, kid," Maria said, giving Toto a hug. He was surprisingly hot. It was small wonder—for a mere child, being put on the aircraft all alone and then crashing would've been enough of a shock, but then he'd gotten soaked to the skin on the raft. On top of that, they'd been attacked by monsters. It would've been strange if he *hadn't* been a mess both mentally and physically. And yet, the boy hadn't grumbled at all or groaned in pain even once.

Maria thought he couldn't be gloomy straight to the core—her woman's intuition told her as much. This was the same child who'd asked D to save them all. Though he kept his head low, somewhere inside him there lay a great, burning courage. And Maria believed that even if a man were gloomy, even if he were a criminal, when the time came, that courage would shine through.

Apparently they were traveling through an enclosed waterway, and droplets of water fell incessantly from the ceiling. The walls to either side looked quite high, and the ceiling quite wide.

"Huh?" Bierce could be heard to say a little way off, and Maria reflexively turned her eyes forward. She intently focused her gaze on the depths of the white fog.

There's a light. Something luminous is floating up ahead. There are two of them. But what could they be?

As she was wondering this, they slowly rose up.

That's the sound of water dripping. It's pretty far off in the distance. Yet they still seem so big. How large could they really be? How could they rise so high? Why are they staring at us like that? We're moving toward them. Closer and closer every second!

She rose to her feet unsteadily. The glows were above her now—almost directly overhead.

Okay, they're coming down. There's a warm wind coming off them. It's hitting us.

At that instant, Maria jerked as if she'd received an electric shock. From behind, she could sense an intense and unearthly aura bearing down on her. Gripped by an indescribable fear, Maria collapsed on the spot. Violent trembling assailed her. Meanwhile, the thing or things overhead rapidly faded in the distance. After a short time, she heard a splash to one side of the raft. It sounded as if something quite large had been swallowed up.

Although she wasn't sure exactly what'd happened, she got the feeling they'd been saved. From here and there, sighs of relief rang out. Jan asked what the hell that thing had been, and the transport officer replied he was damned if he knew.

Once her trembling had subsided, Maria looked at their savior. The Hunter who'd driven away that unknown *thing* with his air of murderous intent alone was visible as no more than a black shadow behind the wall of milky whiteness.

After another hour passed, this time without incident, the fog abruptly cleared. The raft had started moving to the right, toward an enormous stone quay. Bringing the raft to a stop next to one of several rocky protrusions that looked like jetties, D announced with a coolness and brevity befitting the young man, "Land."

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III

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More than desolation, it was an air of death that lay thick around the group. Aside from D, all of them seemed on edge, with the stagnant air and bits of rock falling here and there only making it worse. Devastation robbed one of energy, but death filled one with terror. Though they were sealed away in this stone fortress, it was filled with a grayish light that frightened the group.

“What’s going on here?” Jan asked D after they’d gone up the rock wall and he’d checked his footing several times. “Since we came here, the fortress has gone back into operation. I thought you said the Sacred Ancestor’s army trashed this place?”

“This is powered by another source.”

“What?”

D led the group to a fifteen-foot-wide entrance in the rock wall. The members of his party could only stare at the gigantic iron gate that towered over them. Its rusted surface was studded with hobnails the size of a child’s head. It stood more than thirty feet tall.

“It’s like a door for a giant,” the transport officer groaned.

When D stepped up to the gate, it opened down the middle without a sound. The group advanced into a room that was the size of a small castle courtyard.

“What’s the story here? There are no windows or doors! And that ain’t all. There’s a God-awful smell,” Jan said, his nose twitching.

Maria added, “I wonder if someone or something wandered in here since the place was wiped out.”

“Nobody’s been in here for five thousand years.”

Maria looked at D in surprise. The voice had come from his direction, sure enough. But why had it sounded so hoarse? At any rate, the voice’s words erased any other questions about it.

“Five thousand years? And this smell hasn’t faded in all that time?”

D raised his right hand. But not by way of a reply.

The gate through which they’d entered had slowly begun to shut. Though both Bierce and Weizmann trained looks of concern on D, he didn’t so much as arch

an eyebrow of his inhumanly handsome visage. For about five seconds after the gate closed, no one said a word. They were waiting for D's reaction.

He didn't move a muscle, but the gates opened again. Seeing the scene beyond them, the group cried out. It wasn't the quay, but rather a hall at the end of a seemingly endless corridor. The chamber they'd entered had been an elevator.

There wasn't time to be surprised by this as D stepped out into the corridor. He went over to one of the iron doors in the stone wall, and it opened perfectly naturally.

As if coaxed along by D's relaxed stride, the rest of the group entered. Maria cried out for joy. The stone room was ten times brighter than the last, and at a glance the woman recognized the medical equipment assembled there.

"This was a treatment center for their human servants. Unfortunately the machines have all been destroyed, but there may be some medicine left. The beds are next door. All of you need to wait here."

"What do you mean, wait here?" Jan asked. "Until your job's done? Or until whatever monsters are chasing us show up? How do we know it's safe in here?"

D went over to a white desk to his left and held his left hand out over the black sphere that sat on it. A diagram appeared on the wall.

"Here's a map of the fortress. It should be safe enough to look for food. But once the sun goes down, you're not to set foot out of this room."

"Just a second there!"

"This facility is equipped with devices to protect the humans receiving treatment here. Relax."

"Protect them from what?" Weizmann asked.

"From their god," D replied, heading for the door. The people assembled behind him were no longer his concern. Now it was time to be a Vampire Hunter.

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After putting her three charges into bed in the neighboring room, Maria returned to the treatment center.

“How’s it look?” Jan asked.

“All three of them are showing early symptoms of pneumonia. All we can do is keep them warm, get some nutrients into them, and get them into a hospital later.”

“As far as food goes, the delivery boy and Bierce went off to look for some. But this sure is a hell of a mess we’re in. Right about now, I was supposed to be in a hotel in the Capital snoring my brains out. Instead, I’m stuck in this mystery shit hole watching over a suckling. Makes me wonder whether there’s really a god.”

I believe there is.

“Huh?” Jan said, glancing at Maria, but she looked just as puzzled as he did.

Could it be? he wondered.

God is all around you.

That’s it, he thought. *It’s the same voice that spoke to me on the raft.*

It continued, saying, *Is this the situation you want to be in? I don’t see how it could be. Do you know why this has happened to you? Because you’re a mobster with nothing but strength to your credit. And the others—that woman, the old people, even the child—all look down on you.*

Who are you? he wanted to ask, but he couldn’t say the words. Dazedly, yet in a way that Maria wouldn’t notice, he listened to the voice. And its next words were to strike him hard and burn themselves into his heart.

God can change people. Make you something greater, stronger, more deserving of fear.

Bullshit! he meant to sneer, but the word never came out. It was a terribly attractive offer.

If you want to become all those things, slip out of this room tonight and come to me. I’ll give you my location when the time comes.

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“Dear . . . can you hear me?” Mr. Stow heard his wife say to him from the next bed, but he ignored her. He was chilled to the bone and exhausted. What’s

more, he was sick and tired of listening to the old woman's disconsolate tone. He decided to just keep breathing steadily.

"You're asleep, then. Good."

He was relieved to hear the resignation in her voice, but then she continued.

"I'm sure you probably know this already, but even if we go to Pare's, he won't be happy to see us. Yes, it's just as you said. To our children, you and I are nothing more than the wrinkly old people who raised them. They have no special feelings for us at all. Pare told me something a long time ago, right before he left home. He said it was natural for parents to bring up a child. And while it wasn't strange for children to see their parents, it was natural for the parents to die alone instead of putting a burden on their children."

Beneath his blanket, Mr. Stow's blood ran cold, but his ears caught the old woman's voice, ringing out doleful and sweet.

"When he said that, I just resigned myself to it. When the children left home, our job was done. But you don't see it that way. You always said we did this or that for those children, so they should do the same for us without giving us any argument. Our children all knew it. And Pare came out and said it. When he left, he said he hated you. Said they never asked you to give up your life for them. So they didn't want you or me interfering in their lives, either."

The old man's body trembled. The nerve of that boy! And the nerve of his wife, repeating these things! He knew all too well that his children didn't welcome them. He understood things hadn't gone well between them for a long time. But to say this to him now, in this of all places, even if she thought he was sleeping—

You're right.

It wasn't his wife that said this. The voice that reverberated in his head was much deeper and stronger than that of the woman who'd shared his toil for exactly fifty years. The old man couldn't ask who it was. But he knew whom the voice belonged to.

Your dissatisfaction is natural. What terrible sons you have. Do they think you shouted at them and beat them because you wanted to? A farmer's lot is hard. At times, he can get in a foul mood. At times, he might also want to lose himself

in drink. Everyone gets drunk and knocks their wife and children around. And taking a hot poker to a child who doesn't do what he's told or locking him outside in winter with no supper are both part of establishing discipline. Everything you did was justified. If they can't see that, that's their problem. You know, I believe those ingrates need to be punished. Very, very severely. But first, you'll need to be stronger.

The old man no longer asked who it was. It'd already said. Naturally, his wife didn't seem to have heard it.

"How will I get stronger? How can I have my vengeance—I mean, how can I punish the ingrates?"

Tonight, wait until everyone is fast asleep, and then go outside. You can leave the rest to me.

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For the boy, having this high fever was actually rather pleasant. He was able to stay in bed. It'd been years since he'd been able to just lie around like this. At the monastery, he hadn't been allowed to miss work, no matter how high a fever he had. It was on account of that rule that Eurina had died spitting blood, and Pol had fallen and never gotten up again, dead before anyone knew it. For breakfast they'd had cold soup and a piece of bread, one of only two meals a day. Forced to labor in the fields for twelve hours straight, children didn't last long. Just catching a cold was enough to have them dropping like flies. A few winters ago, ten of them had fallen at the same time, making the garden seem like a quiet battlefield.

Still, the other kids had it better. They at least had friends. The boy had had some too, in the beginning, but once they noticed his habit, they steered clear of him. As if staying away from him protected them from anything. The silent treatment the other children gave him left the boy essentially bereft of hope. His parents, sister, and brother had abandoned him for the same reason. The boy could remember quite clearly waking up one morning to find his house empty and seeming strangely bigger. He'd been sad. There was no reason he wouldn't feel that way.

His family, the children at the monastery, and everyone else had taken a liking to him at first. He never sensed any anger from them at the start. But that always changed. At some point, the boy got in the habit of living with his head hung low. He knew why everyone turned their backs on him, yet it wounded him deeply. The only reason he felt somewhat at peace was because the old woman in the bed and the other woman—sketchy, but nice—had been kind to him. But even they would eventually—

That's right. Once they truly know you, none of them will have anything to do with you. This fleeting kindness means nothing. You're just a little different. The truth is, if they just keep their distance there won't be a problem, and it's not as if it happens every day. Yet they alienated you. Pushed you away. Left you all alone. They didn't try to understand your pain. They didn't care what happened to you. Grieve no more. What you need is anger. Anger to lay them low, to strike them dead.

"It's no use," the boy said, curling up in a ball. "I can't do that. If I could, I would've got angry a long time ago."

I'll make it so you can, the voice said gently. Toto got the feeling that it sounded like someone he'd played with a long time ago.

"Really?" the boy asked with all his heart.

THE WHISPERER

CHAPTER 4

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I

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The second the Hunter passed through the enormous gate, the world began to change. The walls, floor, ceiling, and pillars that'd had straight lines and right angles until that point rippled like a heat shimmer, losing all proper geometry. Even the sunlight began to shine from impossible angles, casting shadows in impossible places.

"A force field's creating a distortion," the Hunter's left hand said, sounding repulsed. "Those old-time Nobles sure did believe in a strange god. They'd have been better off believing in just the Sacred Ancestor. Oh, what's this?"

Up ahead, the floor rippled like waves and twisted, and where it swapped places with the ceiling, they could see the back of a figure in black.

"That's you, D! Interesting. So, space has been distorted too? Right now, if you were to throw a stake, it'd probably go right through your own back."

D remained silent, seemingly taking in what remnants of battle were still left around him. Pillars were smashed, a huge hole had been blasted in the floor, and part of the ceiling was melted. The Sacred Ancestor's army had pushed in this far.

Presently there appeared ahead of them a cyclopean doorway that could only be described as a parallelogram on the verge of collapse. Ten yards from it, D halted. The doors were two panels of lustrous black metal. In front of the entrance—hinged to open down the middle—lay fragments of bizarre sculptures that had apparently been decorations for the doorway. The utter indifference of the unblemished doors became an overwhelming force thanks to their sixty-foot height and thirty-foot width. No weapons the Sacred Ancestor's forces possessed were any use beyond this portal—not even a dimensional cannon could obliterate the doors.

“All alone, the Sacred Ancestor opened these doors and went inside. And returned a year later. They say he never did tell anyone what happened in that time.”

The surface of the Hunter’s left hand rippled and shook, the muscles quaked, and a tiny human face took shape.

“The Nobility succeeded in calling forth gods. That much is certain. When they first attacked this place, the Sacred Ancestor’s army had thirty thousand men—but they were wiped out in a day. By nothing short of the power of a god. It’s said the only one to escape was the Ultimate Noble, Grand Duke Valcua. If left to its own devices, their god surely would’ve conquered the world. But it wasn’t perfect. The day the Sacred Ancestor himself took the field, it allowed him to make it this far, then squared off with him. Just thinking about what kind of battle took place behind those doors gives me goose bumps. After the contest, they say the Sacred Ancestor went to sleep for a hundred years. Apparently it took quite a toll on him.”

“He screwed up,” D said.

“Too true,” the left hand confessed. “And that’s why you’re out here. But no matter how you look at it, you shouldn’t have taken this job. Look at my goose bumps! I bet even the Sacred Ancestor got them. The question is, can we even get these doors open?”

If you’d asked a hundred people this, all one hundred replies would’ve been in the negative.

The door trembled and twisted without a moment’s rest, and even when D stepped forward and put his left hand to it, it still didn’t take its normal shape. After applying a little force, D quickly pulled his hand back.

“Damn,” the face in it groaned. “Why, the power you put into it heads off in a different direction—or rather, it just spirals off! At this rate, that door could be made of tissue paper and you still couldn’t get it open.”

The voice flowed. Once D’s left hand had entered his coat pocket, the sound of something being chewed could be heard. When he pulled his hand out again, it had a little mouth in it. Black dirt tumbled from its lips as it chomped away.

“Been a while since I did that,” the hoarse voice stated with pleasure.

D put his left forefinger against his right wrist and pulled it lightly. A fine vermilion line immediately appeared, and D put the palm of his left hand beneath the blood that spilled out. The bright blood flowed into the tiny mouth. The mouth coughed, and then D took his left hand away and stroked the wound. The bleeding ceased. And the wound began to fade.

When he raised the hand high, the mouth let out a belch. With a great roar the wind whirled around—it was being sucked into the mouth with terrific force. Pale blue flames burned in the depths of its maw. Earth, wind, fire, and water had been assembled.

Once again the black-gloved hand touched the surface of the iron door. The Hunter didn’t seem to put any particular force behind it. He remained that way for five seconds. Then ten.

Look. Both halves of the door swung in ever so slightly with a creak. The crack where the iron doors met became a fine line of light, its thickness grew, and from beyond it blew a mysterious black wind. Was there nothing concerning the Nobility that this young man couldn’t handle? The iron doors that were supposed to disperse all force applied to them now seemed ready to yield.

It was then that the change happened. In the stone wall to either side of the iron doors was a three-foot-deep niche, fifteen feet long, and each of them housed three monklike statues in hooded robes, though the ones to the right of the doorway had their heads lying down at their feet, while the three to the left remained intact.

The latter trio had begun to move. Letting out the kinds of grotesque screams that were inconceivable from any human throat, they writhed on the floor. They were the movements of stone; there was no mistaking that. However, little by little, they were becoming more human. Even the colors of their robes became evident. Dark blue, yellow, and gray.

“The six guardian knights,” the hoarse voice said. “Three of them were beheaded by the Sacred Ancestor. But supposedly the other three were turned to stone. And they say those three were the only ones that managed to wound the Sacred Ancestor. So, the legends are true? People turned to stone, stone

changing into human beings . . . D,
you have to take care of these clowns first.”

D turned. He knew that what his left hand said was true.

The robed figures charged toward him like the wind. The Hunter’s right hand went for his weapon’s hilt. A silvery gleam shot toward the neck of the one in front of him. It could even cleave rock.

“Oh!”

The cry of astonishment was overlaid with a metallic sound. One of those who’d just finished turning into a human being—the one in the yellow robe—had parried the blow—a blow from D’s sword! An instant later, a blade whizzed toward D. The parry had become an attack. Sparks shot out twice—and the two combatants switched places. The robed figure reeled, clutching his belly as he twisted around. Not taking another strike at him, D flew through the air. A blow mowed through the position he’d occupied, then headed for where he landed. It was from the figure to the rear—the foe in dark blue.

At this point, heaven and earth shook. Though D managed to land safely, his opponent was thrown off balance. Not facing his foe, D dashed in the direction of the corridor that had led him there, vanishing in the blink of an eye.

“Were you whipped?” the hoarse voice groaned, sounding like it had to squeeze the words out.

D's left shoulder was split open. Fresh blood fell to the floor. The one in the yellow robe had scored a hit.

"Even for you, those three are a lot to handle. Don't take them on unless you can do it one on one."

Not replying, D looked at the gate. The doors slammed shut.

Once again, heaven and earth shook.

"What's that?"

This time, the voice got an answer.

"An attack from outside. This was a fortress, wasn't it?"

Undaunted, the gorgeous figure in black started back the way he'd come at a rapid clip. But behind him, the number of headless statues had increased by one.

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On his return, D was met by Jan and Weizmann. He learned Bierce had gone to the command center to get a peek at what was happening outside.

"I'm going, too. Don't leave this room."

As D quickly turned around, Jan was right behind him.

"Take me with you. I'm sick and tired of babysitting women and children."

"It's a job just the same."

"I'll do as I please!" the mobster shouted, and then his eyes met D's. The mobster stopped moving.

"I told you not to leave this room."

Not waiting for his reply, D went through the door. It was precisely thirty seconds later that Jan's metabolism returned to normal.

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The command center was on the seventh floor of the fortress. All told, the fortress had ten floors. All of the electronic devices arrayed in the vast chamber had been destroyed. It was apparent at a glance that they were powerless. From

the window the warrior could see outside—that, at least, was something.

The holographic schematic in the medical center had given them the layout of the fortress. Carved out of the heart of a mountain, the fortress was protected by a rock wall that towered more than a hundred yards high. To either side of the natural stronghold, walls towered in excess of two hundred yards, while the defile between them was so tight that only one person at a time could pass, hampering enemy invaders.

Before the rocky stronghold there had once lain three layers of defenses, but all of them had been destroyed by the Sacred Ancestor's forces, leaving only a cratered expanse. And beyond that—in a spot about a mile and a quarter away—the ground was covered with innumerable troops and weapons. The armored soldiers were divided into infantry in yellow and cavalry in green astride cyborg horses, while the figures in blue and green lingering in the rear on the tanks were probably the commanders or other high-ranking officers. Bathed in the light of midday, the vibrant colors seemed to gleam brilliantly.

"They're not Nobility—so what are they?" Bierce mused as he peered down from a window where all the glass had broken out, but just then the door behind him opened.

"D?"

When Bierce turned to look, his eyes were greeted by a man in a yellow robe closing on him. There was no killing lust about him. And yet, the warrior's body was rapidly cooling from its core. Within the robed man's hood was a face that some would even describe as refined, and a faint smile now graced it.

While he was making a leap to the right along the window, Bierce swung his right arm. His aim was flawless—the arrows he hurled had dropped everything he aimed for until now.

As the man in the robe dashed, his right hand flashed out. Striking down both arrows with ease, he moved with unbelievable speed toward the rooted Bierce.

A broad blade fell toward him—the blow would split him like a piece of kindling. Bierce parried it with the arrows in his left hand. Cutting through two of the four the warrior clutched, the blade got halfway through a third shaft, and then halted. Bierce knew he was in a fix. Though he thought he'd been braced

well enough to parry the blow, his opponent's strength was beyond his expectations. His feet felt heavy, as if they were sticking to the floor. He could neither flee nor attack.

His face still emotionless, the other man put more strength behind his assault. The third arrow snapped. The edge of his blade was sinking into the fourth shaft.

Is this where I cash out? the warrior thought, and then even more strength was brought to bear on him, driving Bierce down on one knee.

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II

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The foe's power was focused on the relentless pursuit of Bierce's demise. As soon as he made the last push, the warrior would be finished.

Without warning, the pressure abated. Even before Bierce sprang up, the man leapt to the right, putting a scorched automated table to his back. His blade pointed at Bierce, the enemy turned his face toward the door—and saw D standing there. Impatience bubbled into his hitherto-emotionless face.

"Stay out of this," Bierce called over to the Hunter, drawing a fresh arrow.

The enemy turned to Bierce. He seemed to be shouldering the blade of his sword as he charged forward.

Leaping back, Bierce swung both arms. His opponent's blade flashed out, cutting down the first four arrows. And he had speed and time enough to do the same to the remaining four. However, they evaded a swipe of his sword and sank into the floor, while the timing of the third attack was staggered, scattering the arrows like the seeds of an impatiens.

A cry of pain rang out. Although the enemy had cut down two of the arrows, one of the remaining ones pierced him from the right shoulder to the lung, while the other stuck horizontally into the right side of his neck. When four arrows had come at him at the same time, the enemy had easily taken them out with his

swordplay, but when they simultaneously came from different angles, he was powerless to stop them. With two arrows sticking out of him, the foe in yellow simply stood there for a moment, and then fell flat on his back.

On seeing this, Bierce finally exhaled. There was laughter in his heart. Taking a deep breath, he let it fill him, then let it out again. He repeated this once more, and then his breathing was back to normal.

"Well done."

When he looked up, D was beside him. He alone knew the power of the foe Bierce had slain. And for that reason, his praise carried great weight.

"You'll have to excuse me if I don't say thank you," Bierce responded. "I knew I'd gotten rusty, but I had no idea it was this bad. I was so afraid of knowing for sure, I even skipped training. And now it's coming back to haunt me."

With a disheartening promptness D went over to the window and peered out. The wistful glory days of others didn't interest this young man in the least. The blood-chilling beauty of his frozen profile no doubt captivated Bierce.

Looking out the window from beside D, he said, "They're not Nobility, eh?"

Countless colorful forms filled the valley—they reminded the warrior of insects stuffed into a little box. Naturally, there were humanoid soldiers, but there were also spiderlike figures clinging to the cliffs. Perhaps the reason there weren't any in the water had something to do with their being an army of the Nobility.

"They're the Sacred Ancestor's army," the Hunter said.

"What?"

"Part of the destroying forces were sealed away somewhere to guard against this fortress going back into operation. They were probably in a pocket dimension, though there seem to be a bit too many for that."

"Roughly thirty thousand—and there's no telling if that's all of 'em or not." The warrior looked at D and asked, "Why'd the fortress start up again?"

"Because I came along."

"And you brought us all here knowing that would happen?"

“If nothing had been done, those three would’ve died. Besides, it was *all of you* who decided to follow *me*.”

Bierce was at a loss for words.

“I came here to put down a god. However, it’s probably protecting you now. It’s ironic.”

“But we—”

Before Bierce could finish speaking, he was assailed by a tremendous impact. The fortress carved from the rock of the mountain trembled—for the mountain itself was shaking. However, it wasn’t for the expected reason.

“They’re not doing anything out there!” Bierce shouted, one hand planted against the wall to support his body. “Not firing any missiles or atomic cannons at us. Yet the place is shaking like mad—I don’t get it.”

Although he stared at D in expectation of some sort of answer, the owner of that heavenly countenance made no reply, but simply gazed in silence at the land. His face was unexpectedly thrown into shadow.

As he crinkled his brow, Bierce too was assimilated by the darkness.

“What’s that shadow from?” Bierce asked, fright having taken residence in his voice. Reckless outlaw or warrior, so long as a person remained human, he couldn’t eliminate fear from his consciousness. Perhaps that was what made humans such odd and hopeless beasts. And now, that fear had ridden out on his words to show itself.

An enormous shadow covered the world outside. Sliding over the ground, the walls, the remains of the defenses, it closed on the Sacred Ancestor’s vast army. The army began to retreat—they’d noticed the shadow’s true form. As they systematically backed away from the rear, they remained facing forward—but they weren’t in time. The shadow swallowed half of the thirty thousand.

There was a light. Beneath it, soldiers could be seen. Suddenly it was engulfed in black. The blackness deepened only in the spot where the soldiers had been swallowed up. The shadow then moved away . . . but there was no sign of the soldiers there.

“Half of them—fifteen thousand men—just gone!” Bierce exclaimed, wiping his brow. At some point, sweat had started to pour from him. But now there was no shadow. “What *was* that shadow, anyway? D, you must’ve seen it, right?”

D nodded. Bierce suspected that this man knew everything. If not, how could he remain so calm after seeing *that*? The shadow, which had painted over the silhouettes of the two men in the room before spiriting off fifteen thousand people to parts unknown, possessed countless writhing tentacles.

“That thing—was it the god?”

“That’s right.”

The Hunter’s calm reply physically chilled Bierce. What were this man’s nerves made of?

“The enemy has withdrawn, but they’ll be back again.”

D watched the soldiers retreat down the valley, then turned and headed for the door.

“There’s no guarantee the power of this god will be manifested every time. Nor should it be allowed to. Go back downstairs.”

“Please, wait,” Bierce called to him. “If you hadn’t come, I’d have been killed. Ten years ago, I’d have held my own, but now I just get knocked around. It doesn’t matter what I’m fighting. The folks downstairs think I’m still a full-fledged warrior, but the truth is I’m washed up. I can’t do squat.”

He spat out his confession like a glob of blood.

D didn’t even halt. As he passed through the doorway, his steely voice came back to Bierce, saying, “You’re alive. The others downstairs are counting on you.”

“Yeah, but I’m—” he called out, but by then D was already through the door and out of sight.

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Those in the treatment center already knew that the battle had begun. Huddling around D and Bierce upon their return, they all

sought some explanation. When D clarified the situation, their anxiety only deepened.

"So what happens if we stay here like this? If the fortress falls, will we all be killed?"

"Yes."

When D said this, his verification of the cold, hard truth was merciless.

"And knowing this would happen, you led us here. You cold-hearted bastard!"

Though Maria's body trembled with rage, when D gave her the same reply he'd given Bierce, the woman fell silent.

"In other words, we're caught between a rock and a hard place," Weizmann summarized, looking as if he were about to scream at any minute. He was fighting back his fear, too. "The enemy's going to attack the god that started this place up again. On the other hand, the god will counterattack. So, to our friend the Hunter here, who's supposed to put down this god, both are enemies, and both are allies. The forces outside could help attack the god, while the god protects us from the army trying to kill us. What do you plan on doing?"

"It's simple. Kill the damn god!" Jan snapped, his hostility naked and virulent. "Then, if all goes well, we get the hell out of here as fast as we can. Instead of walking around with all that dead weight, I could make better time on my own. Oh, delivery boy, *you* can stick with him, because it was your bright idea to hire him in the first place. How do you plan on paying him?"

"That was the best we could do at the time. You think we'd have been better off just hanging around in that valley waiting to die, you stupid little hood? If we make it back to the Capital in one piece, I'll give you a taste of my clout. I'll have your punk ass in front of a firing squad the same day we get there."

"Don't make me laugh, you stupid flunky! There ain't a chance of an incompetent like you making it out of here alive. Either those clowns out there will shoot you full of holes, or our wonderful god is gonna gobble you up. It's fine if you wanna pretend you're running the show, but I doubt you can even wipe your own ass."

“You little son of a bitch!” Weizmann growled, his hand going for the motor gun by his hip. The cylindrical magazine rested at his feet.

“You want a piece of me?” Jan said, getting a firm grip on the hilt of his broadsword.

“Hold it right there. This is disgusting,” Maria said, stepping between them. “We’ve got three sick people in the next room. They can hear every word you say. If you’re grown men, try acting like it. So, good-looking, you sure you don’t want to come up with some way to get all of us out of here first?”

“I’ve got something to do before that,” D replied.

Maria shrugged her shoulders. Though she had experience changing men’s minds, she knew in an instant that this time it wasn’t going to work. That being the case, she had to look for the next best alternative.

“Then we could always take off on our own. What do you think, warrior?”

Bierce nodded. He shared her sentiment.

“The best thing to do would be either to go by boat under cover of night or scale the mountain behind us, I suppose.”

Having said this, he looked at D to gauge his reaction, but all that lay before him was the Hunter’s icy beauty. D had promised to protect them once he’d taken care of his previous engagement. If they were to nullify that, they would mean nothing to him.

Looking at the door to the treatment center, Bierce said to Maria, “We can get out of here, but can we bring *them* with us?”

Heaving a sigh, the woman shook her head. “That’s the tricky part. All three of them are running high fevers now, moaning and groaning. They need two or three days of complete bed rest. If we had some medicine, they wouldn’t be in such pain, though.”

Silence descended—it was the silence of everyone waiting for someone else to save them.

“Leave ’em.”

It wasn’t clear who said this. Nor could they even tell which direction it’d come

from. They all eyed each other uncomfortably. The remark had made one thing perfectly clear.

“That’s a hell of a thing to say,” Jan said, glaring all around him, but his voice had no force behind it.

No one responded.

“At any rate, when we leave, we’ll all be going together,” Weizmann finally said, and the rest of the group nodded in unison.

Turning to D, he said, “Seems your job is to defeat this god thing, but what are your chances?”

“You mean to tell me *you* only take jobs you know you can do?” D replied frostily. “I can’t say that I’ll come out on top. I can’t say how long it’ll take, either. So you folks have to choose your own path. But since a Noble’s after you, I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

The officer was at a loss for words, and everyone looked down at the floor. Weizmann himself had come up with the lie about him being pursued by a Noble.

“But first, you have to wait until this job is finished. Whether you make a break during that time or stay here is up to you. You’ve got a leader for that.”

No one looked at Weizmann.

“I’m off. I leave the rest to you.”

As D walked away, no one called out to him. He was right. Everyone had to look out for themselves. This was the Frontier.

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III

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After turning a fourth corner, D suddenly halted.

“What is it?” asked a hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hand.

“The path is changing.”

“I don’t sense anything at all.”

“That’s how the believers brought it human sacrifices.”

“Hmm, you’re just full of fun facts, aren’t you. Well, it sure seems they don’t wanna let you reach the god. Looks like that time with the Sacred Ancestor took a lot out of it.”

“Make a path.”

“Again?”

A slight belch came from the palm of his left hand.

Just then, a figure came into view at the far end of the gloom-shrouded corridor.

“We’ve got company,” the hoarse voice said with amusement.

The hooded robe was a grayish hue. The man inside it already held his longsword in his right hand. Before D drew his, his opponent charged at him without a word.

The instant his foe brought his sword down, D’s right hand flashed into action. With a mellifluous sound the blades bit together. As he parried his opponent’s blow, D stood perfectly straight. D then easily reversed the force that traveled from his waist to the soles of his feet. Adding just a tad more power to it, he sent his opponent flying.

By the time the hooded figure made a desperate bid to regain his posture, D was already overhead, transformed into a mystic black bird. He swung his blade down. Beneath it, his foe’s face warped with despair—though D saw something a split second before he struck. His opponent’s miserable look had become a smile.

As he felt his sword cleave the man from the left side of his neck all the way to the right lung, D experienced a blistering pain in exactly the same location and staggered backward. His foe was also reeling. But look at his foe as he just barely managed to stay on his feet—the black coat, the wide-brimmed traveler’s hat, the longsword he carried, the blue pendant that swayed against his chest. He

was exactly like D. However, while blood gushed like a waterfall from the gaping wound on the real D, this one was calmly smiling.

And then the foe adjusted his footing and launched a vicious attack. Narrowly blocking it, D leapt back, hurling a rough wooden stake as he did so. It pierced his bounding foe through the base of his throat, and blood then spilled from the throat of the real D. D was down on one knee as his double walked over to him and raised his blade to strike. The tip of it shook ever so slightly.

A streak of stark light skimmed along the surface of the ground. A futile blow—but while D was unaffected by it, his foe received a deep gash to his right knee. Tumbling forward without a sound, the Hunter's opponent barely managed to turn himself around.

As he listened to the sound of his foe fleeing with a trail of blood behind him, D used the sword he'd jabbed into the floor to steady himself. The agony surging through his body didn't draw so much as a single cry from him.

"They made another you," the hoarse voice said in amazement. "And he was the real thing, too. As a result, when this real one gets cut, the other real one is cut too. Hmm, there's a certain logic to that."

And after relating this, the hand followed the trail of blood across the floor, saying, "He might've become you, but he couldn't keep the face. That's why he took off in the middle of your battle."

The voice flowed upward—D had gotten to his feet. While he'd sustained life-threatening injuries in two places, the bleeding had stopped. He didn't seem to be in any pain at all as the hem of his coat fluttered out around him and he turned to walk away. At his back, there was the sound of his hilt clicking against the scabbard.

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"This is a hell of a place we've come to!" Jan said, swinging the broadsword in his right hand. He wanted to cut into their enemies so badly he could hardly stand it. The sound of his weapon knifing through the wind was unusually sharp, proving that he'd braced his hips for added power.

"We've got a castle that houses a monster, and a ghost army from ages ago

laying siege to it. It's like a play you'd see at some Frontier festival!"

"There's not a lot we can do about it. After all, we're the ones who followed the Hunter here. Now, if you're really a man, why don't you pull yourself together? You swinging that shiny toy all over the place isn't exactly what I want to see."

"Shut up, you slut—a woman's not worth shit when the going gets tough. Keep flapping those lips of yours, and you'll wind up crying yourself hoarse!"

"What'd you say, you petty thug?" Maria said, getting up from her chair and slowly heading toward Jan.

"Hey, knock it off," Officer Weizmann called over to them.

Bierce leaned back against the wall and remained silent.

"Keep your nose out of this, delivery boy!" Jan shouted, thrusting the tip of his broadsword toward the chest of the approaching Maria.

"Wow, pretty impressive. You feel like a big man, waving a blade at an unarmed woman?" Maria said, not a speck of fright in her expression. Looking Jan square in the eye, she continued, "Go into any bar in the Frontier and you'll find a heap of guys like you. You think you're special, different from everyone else. Now you're just a mobster or a drunk, but if you set your mind to it, you could make something of yourself anytime you like. That's the kind of self-serving pipe dream you idiots believe. Those are the very same guys who're the first to turn tail and head for the hills when the going gets tough. All you're good for is acting like a big man in front of women and children."

"You bitch!" Jan snarled, his whole face stained vermilion. As it gripped the hilt of his broadsword, his right hand trembled with rage.

"What's the matter? If you've got a problem with me, go ahead and make something of it with that pig sticker of yours. If you can't even manage that, then drop the tough-guy routine!"

"Why, you little—"

Jan's field of view clouded with rage. It was pitch black, like the middle of the night.

Bierce pulled away from the wall.

“They’re coming,” said a voice. It was faint, but it speared through the deathly silence to pound against their eardrums.

Turning in the direction of the voice, Maria suddenly looked surprised as she said, “Kid?”

Standing in front of the door to the recovery ward with the bed sheets wrapped around him was Toto. He didn’t have a change of clothes. But his damp things would be dry by now.

Glaring at the frozen Jan, Maria walked over to the boy. His little face was flushed as red as an apple. Touching her hand to his forehead, Maria looked like she was going to cry.

“You’ve got a terrible fever. Hey, one of you, locate the storeroom on that map and go find us some medicine. Well, what are you waiting for, you lazy slobs? If you don’t wanna go, I’ll go do it myself!”

Once again, that tiny voice returned to the earlier topic. Moving lips made dry by his fever, Toto said, “They’re coming.”

“Who are?” Maria asked, and it came as little surprise her tone was somewhat unsettled.

The others all listened intently from their respective locations.

“Three people—really scary ones—from outside.”

“Scary people? Who are they?”

The small head shook from side to side. “I don’t know. But there are three of them. And they’re almost here.”

Everyone looked at the door and the window. There was no sign of anyone. Outside, it was evening. From that place of jostling darkness and night, there could be no doubt that three disturbing figures had slipped into the fortress.

“Assassins?” Weizmann asked Bierce.

“Probably. After the rumbling, the enemy didn’t pull anything else. You couldn’t see it from here, but this side counterattacked. The hand of their god

reached out and slapped them right back. They must've seen that a hard push would leave them at a disadvantage. If you can't conquer from without, destroy from within—that's the first rule of laying siege."

"Then those three came in here to put down the god all on their own?"

"Can you think of another reason they'd be here?"

"What happens if they run into us?"

"Try explaining our situation to them, and they'll probably say what a shame that is, forget all about what they're supposed to be doing, and save us all," the warrior remarked snidely.

"Just perfect! Killers from outside. They'd better pray they don't run into me," Jan said, breaking into a grin as if he'd forgotten all about the earlier incident. His broadsword sliced through the air again.

In a completely emotionless tone, Bierce said, "These are three guys who were considered up to the task of disposing of a god. You'd do well to watch out. Maria, if you value your life, don't go outside."

"Oh, of course I won't—or I wouldn't, but I don't have a choice," Maria said, her low, urgent tone drawing the attention of the entire group. The boy rested in the woman's pale arms. It was clear that he'd passed out from his fever.

"Put the kid back into bed for me. I'm gonna go find some medicine," she said, but even though she held out the boy, no one took him from her. "Oh, you're all worthless! Here, he's all yours!"

Walking over to Jan, who was closest, she thrust the diminutive form against his chest.

"Wh—what the hell? Why're you giving him to *me*?"

"Because you're at the bottom of the pecking order."

"You—you stupid bitch!"

The pair of them were about to start round two—but then another voice interrupted. A laughing voice. It was the evil cackle of an imp that relished no morsel more than the suffering of others—that was the only way to describe the malevolence of the laughter.

Everyone looked in its direction. This time, even Bierce turned slowly.

A figure squatted next to a ravaged data-processing unit. The suckling. The same man who was bound by a rope to the leg of the unit. The man who up until now hadn’t said a single word. A man who, having received the kiss of the Nobility, ordinarily would’ve long since been killed by his countrymen. This man was laughing. Not from lunacy. It was laughter underpinned by reason, as if he understood everything—all that had happened up until now, and everything that would come next. That is, supposing a devil could possess reason.

ASSASSINATION

CHAPTER 5

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I

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Although there was no storage area for food or anything else labeled on the three-dimensional schematics, Maria intended to search high and low until she found what she wanted. When she thought about it, she realized the ageless and immortal didn't need a constant store of cold medicine. However, the fact that they had a medical facility for human beings gave Maria hope. The army that had destroyed this place had also consisted of Nobility. As a result, there was a possibility they wouldn't even bother to get rid of any medicine for humans. In light of the devastated equipment in the treatment center, that possibility was extremely remote, but Maria wouldn't give up.

"No way is there any of that," Jan had jeered, while Weizmann had also told her it was no use. Neither of them volunteered to go with her, but Maria remained determined. The knowledge that strangers were outside robbed transport officer and mobster alike of the nerve to go wandering about. Bierce had gone out to survey their floor just a little while ago, but even if he'd been there, his answer probably would've been the same.

Getting off the elevator in the third subbasement, Maria found that storerooms took up the entire floor. Though there'd been a pharmaceutical storeroom on the same floor as the treatment center, it'd been thoroughly destroyed. On this floor, too, each and every door was melted, and the rooms beyond them were choked with the decay of millennia of desolation. Still, Maria walked the vast rooms from corner to corner. Who could say that a single vial of antipyretic hadn't rolled under one of these scorched and fallen walls? That's why she needed to explore every possibility.

She searched a number of rooms, and had a number of things to show for it. There was a container of extremely compressed rations that remained unburned. A cylinder a foot in diameter and three feet long, it contained enough

to feed a hundred people, yet weighed less than five pounds.

We just might be in luck, the woman thought, a satisfied look on her face as she headed into the next storeroom . . . but this one was an utter disappointment. When she came to the last chamber, she slumped to the floor out in the corridor, exhausted. However, after looking at the door, she got a new fire in her eye. Though a little scorched, the door was still intact.

We just might be in luck, she thought again.

Next to the door was a switch to open and close it.

“Hang on, everyone. This one’s gonna have medicine for sure.”

Her finger pressed the triangular switch. At that moment, the switch spread like paint dissolving in water. Her breath caught in her throat and her body pulled back a bit as before her eyes the switch was swallowed up by a silvery surge, which then formed a stain on the wall in the shape of a person, swiftly growing in thickness. As she watched the shiny silhouette emerge from the wall —though to be more accurate, it seemed to be coming out of the water— Maria’s eyes were rendered vacant holes by her surpassing fear. A nose grew from it, and eyes formed. A straight crack became a mouth, and lips took shape. As for the face that it finally formed—

“Why, it’s me!”

If it had spoken at the same time, Maria herself would’ve questioned which of them was real.

Finally, her exact duplicate donned a different expression. A smile. And a particularly sinister one, at that.

“What . . . what in the world are you . . .”

The silvery Maria responded to her frightened tone. In Maria’s own voice it said, “I came from outside. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but this works out perfectly for me. I’ll simply take your place.”

A pair of glittering hands came to rest on the woman’s shoulders. As she dipped down, Maria didn’t say a word but swung her right hand for all she was worth. It held something else she’d scavenged earlier—a dagger with a blade

that was less than eight inches long but preeminently sharp. Not meeting any particular resistance, it cut through both of the silvery arms just above the wrist. The pressure on her shoulders fell away as the hands dropped to the floor, where they became a shiny liquid. The other Maria writhed and twisted backward. As it did, its body began to crumble from the toes up, quickly sinking into the floor.

"I did it!" Maria cried out with delight, and with that she dashed over to the door. The switch was in precisely the same location as before. There was no longer any need to be frightened.

The floor rose up in front of her. Maria didn't manage to scream, both because of her surprise and because the rippling surface of the ground crushed around her torso like a serpent, squeezing the breath from her. It would take her less than two seconds more to suffocate.

Only one of those seconds remained when her savior appeared in the form of a gleam that split the silvery serpent's body in two. Thrown to the floor when her bonds loosened, Maria saw D unleash another attack on his foe. Twitching all the while, the serpent undulated, flattened out, and dissolved into the floor.

Maria watched intently. D had his eyes closed. Some fifteen feet behind him, part of the wall bulged outward, and then stretched right for D. At the tip of it a human head and torso formed and arms took shape. Its hands didn't end in fingers. They were sharp scythes. Without a sound, these weapons zipped at the Hunter's neck from either side.

"Look out!" Maria shouted, but even before she did, D had spun around. His sword was the first thing to make the turn. Maria saw the pair of scythes being severed and sent sailing through the air. Though the attack that immediately followed split the shoulder of the retreating foe, it still managed to smoothly sink back into the wall. Not wasting a second, glittering figures rose up around D. More than a dozen in number, they represented his opponent's ability to assume multiple forms at once. Now D faced more than two dozen scythes and swords.

Maria backed away without realizing it. Her back hit the wall. Letting out a scream, she pulled away—she'd been gripped by the fear that some new form would spring from it. Nevertheless, her eyes remained riveted on D and his

silvery opponents. If D fell, she'd be next, and if he won—but she wasn't in the proper state of mind to think about such things. She got to watch as this gorgeous young man determined whether they lived or died. A mysterious excitement left Maria swooning.

However, the scene that unfolded next was a betrayal of all Maria's expectations. The silver foes unexpectedly sank into the floor and walls, leaving D alone. The Hunter turned toward the stairs, and then quickly came over to Maria.

"Are you okay?"

Though Maria knew he merely asked in lieu of a greeting, her heart raced strangely.

"I guess so. That thing said it came from outside."

"I heard."

"Why'd it run off? I figure maybe it thought you'd kill it."

"Something happened to its colleague."

"Wow!" She tried to imagine what that might've been, but nothing came to her. She quickly gave up. "Well, not that it matters. All this talk about gods and assassins is more than my head can process."

"But you still came down here alone to look for medicine."

"Oh, how'd you know?"

Not replying, D walked over to the intact door and pushed the switch Maria had wanted to, this time without incident. The iron door slid off to the right.

On taking one look inside, Maria exclaimed, "Yes!"

Though it was much smaller than the other storerooms, its shelves were filled with what were unmistakably pharmaceuticals. Maria ran over to the closest shelf, then cried out in despair, "Hey, I don't get it! None of these labels have anything written on them."

Instead, each label was a different color. Apparently that was how the humans in the fortress had told them apart.

“I could take one of each, but there are just too many different kinds. Damn it all! Which one should I get?”

“This one.”

A black-gloved hand reached over to Maria from one side. The bottle that rested in its palm had a lime-green label on it.

“Wh—what’s this?”

“It’s an antipyretic,” D said. “What else do you need?”

After collecting the medicine they required and putting it in a cart, Maria gazed intently at D. At his profile. When she looked at him head on, she didn’t last a full second. Her eyes immediately glazed over, as if she were in a fog. Maria didn’t realize that this was less a problem of her eyes and more one of her brain trying to assess D’s handsome visage. After rubbing her eyes countless times, she realized it was no use and gave up. Even his profile was apparently more than she could take.

“If you’re all done, let’s go,” D said, already walking away.

Pushing the cart as she followed him toward the elevator, Maria asked the question that was suddenly in her head: “Say, why’d you come down here anyway?”

D had left Maria and the others to go slay the god. Whether he’d succeeded in that or failed, it didn’t make sense for him to be on the floor with the storerooms. And he didn’t appear to be injured, either.

Though she received no reply, Maria quickly understood. Though seemingly made of ice—if not the very essence of winter itself—the young man in black had come in search of medicine. And not for himself. Most likely, it’d been for the three people in the treatment center.

“You’re not all bad, are you?” she finally remarked. She thought D might’ve heard her, but he said nothing as he pressed the elevator button and got in.

I wonder if he’s just shy, Maria thought, after the elevator had stopped.

The doors opened.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in!” she said in a prickly tone that bounced

off the warrior who stood there—Bierce.

“Looking for medicine?” D asked.

“I just got back to the room and heard the story from Weizmann.”

Though somewhat late, he’d apparently decided to go help Maria. For her part, Maria was cheered by the thought that there was at least one other real man around. However, when the three of them headed toward the treatment center, the door burst open and Weizmann came flying out.

Seeing how pale his face was, Bierce inquired, “What is it?”

The response was immediate.

“The suckling has disappeared!”

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II

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According to Officer Weizmann, up until the point Bierce came back from his check of the area, heard that Maria had gone off in search of medicine, and left the room, the suckling had been there.

“I made certain I kept my eye on him the whole time I was talking to Bierce. You know, just in case. And the suckling was right there. But after watching Bierce go, I turned around and he was gone.”

Jan reported that he hadn’t seen anything. The recovery room had been searched, but he wasn’t there. In brief, the suckling had suddenly vanished.

“Think the god spirited him away?” Jan asked, derision in his voice. The question was directed at D. The mobster remained skeptical about this god business.

D’s reply made everyone tense, the mobster included.

“That’s right. The suckling is tainted with Noble blood. It wouldn’t be that strange for a god worshiped by the Nobility to sympathize with him.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Bierce said with a wry grin. “The problem is what comes next. What’ll become of the suckling?”

“I don’t know. But the next time you see him, you’ll have to assume he’s the enemy. Put him down without any discussion.”

“Hold it right there!” Weizmann objected. “That suckling’s a test subject bound for the Capital. Killing him out of hand isn’t an option. I won’t have it.”

“You can forget that,” D shot back, his tone infused with a new level of coldness. “From the way he disappeared, he won’t come back unchanged.”

“How do you know that?” Jan asked. “You’re telling us all these things like some know-it-all. Instead of running your mouth, you should be out destroying that god thing of yours. You say this, that, and the other thing about the suckling, but hell, you’re a stinking human/Noble—”

The air froze. And while it lay still and cold, a hard slap resounded.

“What the hell was *that* for?” Jan cried, one hand cradling the cheek that’d been slapped and the other reaching for his broadsword.

“Okay, go for it. If you can, that is,” Maria said, standing before Jan with arms spread wide. She looked at D. “I’ve got something to say here. While *you* were here all safe and sound, *he* went to the storeroom not knowing what he might run into and found us some medicine. Thanks to him, Toto and the Stows are sleeping peacefully. Don’t just act like a tough guy when it suits you, you worthless turd!”

“Why, you stupid slut!”

As he said this, he drew his broadsword, which flew up with a delightful sound.

“Damn!” Jan said, holding his right hand as he crouched. It was numb. He could tell it’d take two or three days to recover from the blow. It wasn’t a strike any human could have made.

Lowering his sword, D looked around the group and said, “Tell the three in the recovery room what I’m telling you now. If you see the suckling, kill him on the spot.”

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Though the sun went down, the suckling didn’t come back, and there was neither an attack from outside nor an assault by the assassins within the fortress. Holding an unsettling variety of murderous intentions, the darkness remained silent.

After eating some of the compressed rations, Mr. Stow didn’t speak to his wife but rather lay down on his bed. The night scared him. He was afraid to sleep, too. Maybe he’d never wake again. When he thought about it that way, it was rather frightening.

Suddenly, the voice rang in his ears. *It's about time I changed you.*

Mr. Stow's body trembled. He quivered with delight. He was ready.

"What should I do?" he inquired in a low voice. And he immediately got an answer.

D was in the corridor. He was prepared for another attack by the assassins or a counterstrike by the two guardians.

"There probably won't be a push from outside until those assassin clowns get some results. If all goes well, they could get locked in battle and kill each other off. We should just wait for that to happen," said the hoarse voice that could be heard from the vicinity of his left hand.

Although there wasn't a single light, the outlines of objects could be barely discerned. And D's handsome features seemed to radiate a light of their own.

"Sensing my approach, both the god and the Sacred Ancestor's army reawakened. Both consider me their foe. If I were them, I'd take care of me first."

"In that case, why don't you just get as far away from these folks as you can? They might get caught in your wake. Then again, I suppose since they came in with you, they'd be the god's enemies, too. So your foes would go after them just like they're after you. It's worrying about stuff like that that's got you hanging around here. Not really what I'd expect from you. Oof!"

Still applying strength to the left hand he'd crushed closed, D focused all his senses and listened as the still darkness drew breath. Suddenly, he turned around.

Toto stood in front of the treatment center. He was pointing straight ahead. The urgent look on his face made D turn again.

At the far end of the corridor, two figures could be seen. Mr. Stow and the suckling. Before D could take a step forward, they vanished.

There was a thud against the floor. D quickly went over to the fallen Toto and scooped him up in his arms. There was no need to place his hand against the

boy's brow. Through the shirt Maria had put on the boy after it dried, the Hunter could feel the blistering heat of his skin.

"He's 107 degrees. Probably due to that astral projection," the hoarse voice remarked as D carried the boy into the treatment center.

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On learning that Mr. Stow was missing from the recovery room, Mrs. Stow didn't appear particularly surprised.

"He had a long list of grievances, that one did. Honeyed words would lead him right out of here. But I think he'll be back presently. Don't trouble yourselves over it."

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Ultimately a battle did unfold. The floor in front of the massive doors that D had tried unsuccessfully to enter took on silvery stains that immediately spread, forming five figures devoid of eyes, noses, and mouths, who then rose smoothly to their feet. They charged ahead like a wave of light. They didn't move their legs, yet they continued forward without stopping. The five figures joined together in a single form. Crashing against the crease where the two doors met, the mass fell flat as if it were water, spread out, and quickly resumed its original shape. Though it tried to slip through the crack in liquid form, it wasn't successful.

Perhaps the silvery stain had given up, because it slid off in the direction from which it'd come, and then halted. About sixty feet away stood a figure in black. It was unclear whether the stain recognized this as a perfect double of D. The silvery figures that quickly emerged from it raised hands that'd been transformed into weapons, seeking to slay the young man in black. When they closed to within six feet of him, he turned away from them. The back that carried his longsword turned a silvery hue. The instant the swords, axes, and scythes of the unflappable silver figures sank into him, the attackers reeled, finding terrible wounds had opened in the same locations on them. For the unholy ability that had reflected D's deadly attack back at him had once again been put to use.

All of the figures dissolved on the floor. As the silver circle lay there like a

puddle of water, the guardian walked over to it in silence. It was a heartbeat later that the stain flew up. It was a disk—but its edges were honed as sharp as any enchanted blade, making it a circular implement of death. A gleam of light lanced through the chest of the figure that had just mimicked its appearance.

When he landed on the floor about thirty feet away, the silver figure's upper body began to slide off his lower half. Falling to the floor, it became a silvery semicircle, while the legs left standing also took the same shape and dropped to the floor.

A second later, the silver mass that had transformed into a weapon to slay its opponent split in two without a sound. Neither of them moved an inch, and after a short while had passed, a pair of figures appeared on the scene. Peering down at the silver remains with an expression so unsettling it defied description was the suckling. The old man behind him remained facing straight ahead with a vacant look in his eyes. Grinning savagely, the suckling took the old man by the hand and walked over to the iron doors.

Greeeee, screamed rusted gears. *Greeeee, greeeee, greeeeeeeeeeeee!*

It was a tortured chorus that would make anyone want to cover their ears—like the cry of hinges that had rusted quietly for a million years. It was the pain of their iron flesh tearing.

Just look. The iron doors even D couldn't part were now opening.

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Sensing a presence, Maria opened her eyes and was shocked. On her right was Weizmann's face. She was on a bed in the recovery room. The men were supposed to be sleeping out in the treatment center.

"What's the meaning of this? Did you think you were gonna get lucky?"

"Not so loud," the transport officer whispered. His eyes darted to Mrs. Stow, then Toto, then back to Maria.

"What do you want, then? I swear, I'll yell so everyone can hear me. When officials from the Capital are involved in a scandal, they get shipped out to the Frontier, you know."

“I’ve had it,” Weizmann said with a heavy sigh. “After letting the suckling get away, the career I was building up for myself will be driven into the ground. When I come back empty handed, I can look forward to exactly what you described.”

“So, what’s that to me? You’re starting to annoy me, mister, you know that?”

“I want you to make me feel better.”

“Excuse me?” Maria replied in disbelief. But at the same time, she’d figured that was what he was after.

“I’m finished anyway. And knowing that, it doesn’t matter what I do now. The least I can do is get one night’s worth of comfort.”

“Okay, baby,” Maria said, biting back her contempt as she stroked the head of the fast-tracked official from the Capital. Gently bringing her face to his cheek, she whispered into his ear in a low, steamy voice. “I’ll show you pleasure like you’ve never seen before. But it won’t be cheap.”

“You want money?” the flustered Weizmann said.

Maria was dumbfounded. “Of course! Your happiness alone isn’t gonna put money in my pocket. You don’t get something for nothing—that’s the way the world works.”

“How much?”

“That’s up to you. Ten dalas minimum. *Special tricks* will run you more.”

“Okay,” Weizmann said with a nod.

Suddenly, the transport officer climbed on top of her. A vicious elbow landed on the side of his head.

“We can’t do it here. Outside! Out!”

“But that’s no good. The enemy’s prowling around out there.”

Undeterred by the elbowing, he reached for her thighs and breasts. He couldn’t conceal his true nature.

“It’s a dangerous thing when a person throws their vanity out the window.”

As she pushed his hands away, Maria wondered what she was going to do.

They couldn't very well do it right there. But he was right about the danger outside.

"Okay," she groaned.

At that instant, someone said almost the same thing in her head.

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III

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"What's that?" D's left hand cried out in a low voice. More than surprise or fear, its tone was one of fulfilled expectation.

"The voice of the god."

D shot a glance at the door, then broke into a run. His goal was obvious.

The change came all at once. The ceiling and floor switched places, and the walls laughed out loud as they stretched and shrank. Every stone in the floor flipped over in a second, and the stairway became an infinite spiral spinning into space. Going *down* the staircase would bring you to the floor above, while racing *up* it took you down into the dungeon. And inhuman cries and groans filled the air like a symphony.

"Looks like one of the assassins managed to wound the god," the left hand remarked with amusement as they traversed a stairway that twisted and turned through the darkness. "It probably lost the ability to wipe out the forces outside —its 'arm,' as it were. If so, they'll launch an all-out attack tomorrow."

Unexpectedly the stairs beneath him gave way. D was falling through the darkness, along with the stone steps that had climbed into the sky. The Milky Way swirled in the distance. His left hand reached up over his head. The tiny mouth that opened in the palm of his hand began sucking in air with a whistling sound. Before long, the air it consumed took on a color, becoming the darkness itself. Even the stars of the Milky Way were swallowed up. Like a curtain being torn down, the darkness was squeezed into a single stream that disappeared

into the maw, leaving an ashen space behind it.

As D continued to fall, four sets of footprints left white trails far off in the distance. The footsteps were falling right along with him.

“Oh, I see. You chose this space on purpose, eh?” the hoarse voice said with admiration. “From here, we can get closer to it. But the energy coefficient will become an imaginary number. One or the other is gonna be absorbed by the Dirac sea.”

“Link me to where those footprints are headed,” D said brusquely.

“That’s crazy! The Laplace connection is still too weak. If you push it, *you’ll* be the one who gets banished to the negative zone.”

“I underestimated them. Link me right away.”

Indecipherable curses shot through the gray world. And D dissolved into that same hue.

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He was standing on a stone floor. The room had been made from enormous boulders. But the floor wasn’t a tightly fitted pattern of hand-worked stone. No lavishly frescoed ceiling or walls existed here. Rough-hewn boulders had been piled haphazardly, distorting all balance and order in the fortress. And it was swimming in blue light.

Turning, D saw huge iron doors. Those same doors. And they were open so that anyone might come or go as they pleased. Someone had made it through them.

“The assassins from outside took a different dimension there,” the left hand said. “Meaning what they encounter there will be others in league with the god.”

Whether that conjured an image in D’s brain of the suckling and Mr. Stow walking away was unclear.

“It’s still squawking, eh?”

His hand was referring to the continuing screams. Screams that could be heard from the depths of the encircling darkness. They weren’t echoes—they were

coming from between the iron doors.

“Apparently it’s fallen back.”

The stone walls around D writhed. Space itself was warping with the god’s pain.

D advanced without saying a word. Stretching on forever, the stony dungeon was uninhabited. Eventually the walls and ceiling were lost from view. D merely followed the voice. A stone plain sealed away in darkness—and D was a traveler there.

“Whoever he is, that assassin’s pretty good. That someone other than you could manage to get in here, let alone deal the god some—what is it?”

Halting, D shot a look up ahead.

The floor was quaking. A rumbling passed through the ground.

In the depths of the darkness, something colossal and pale wriggled. A hundred yards ahead of him, it twisted and thrashed like the tail of a dying snake. As the Hunter drew closer, it became clear that it was a tentacle. The jolts to the floor were violent. If it’d been striking frequently and with full force instead of merely writhing, D might not have been able to stand. The tentacle, glowing with phosphorescence, had been severed cleanly. Nearly perfectly circular, the cut was ten feet in diameter, while the end of the tentacle stretched far, far into the darkness and out of sight.

“It’s gotta be three miles long. Can’t believe it’s been sliced straight through,” the hoarse voice remarked in amazement, for this was part of the god.

D’s hair swayed. The wind was blowing past him.

“What’s this?” the left hand gasped.

The wind was gradually gathering force.

“This ain’t good. The god’s cries of pain have become a wind. Run for it!”

From off in the distance, a sound like a stirring crowd could be heard approaching. The hem of the Hunter’s pitch-black coat flapped so hard it seemed it would be torn to pieces.

“Run for it!”

Moving at a velocity of more than two thousand miles per hour, the wind assailed D’s location ten seconds later.

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“It should be clear now,” said a muffled voice.

Pushing away his shelter, D stepped outside. The plain paved in stone lay under a normal breeze now. A gentle breeze. Beside D lay the refuge he’d just exited. The god’s limb, with a hole carved into it just large enough to fit a single person.

“I don’t think it even budged in that wind. It sure did stand up well,” the hoarse voice said in amazement.

“Do you think you’d blow yourself away with your own breath?” D responded.

“Oh, I get it,” the voice replied, apparently understanding now.

So, the two-thousand-mile-per-hour gale was a sigh of suffering exhaled by the god?

D trained his gaze on the distance. The cries of pain continued. Saying nothing, he began to walk. It was unclear how much time passed—because what flowed here wasn’t the time of the outside world. When was dawn? Ahead of D, darkness was followed by still more darkness.

“Hey,” the hoarse voice said in a bid to get his attention. It’d just glimpsed a fallen figure far off in the distance.

His gait never slowing, D went over to the body. Both D and the hoarse voice had undoubtedly made out the face of the supine figure. Lying on the stone, his lower half stained with fresh blood, was the suckling. Bending down, D checked his pulse and pupils before bringing his left hand over to the man’s waxy countenance.

“Give it a try.”

A face floated to the surface of his palm.

“It’s no use—he’s dead.”

Ignoring the hoarse voice’s objection, the Hunter pushed its tiny face against

the suckling's. Within five seconds, the suckling's corpse opened its eyes. D was reflected in its muddied pupils.

"I thought . . . you'd come," he said, working the words through desiccated lips. His voice, that of the departed, was more youthful than his appearance suggested.

"I'm glad . . . the last person I saw . . . was you. I got stabbed . . . by some assassins from outside . . . There were . . . two of them."

D remained silent. He didn't tell the man not to talk, for he knew there was no chance of saving him.

"They were . . . tough . . . Cut off . . . one of the god's . . . arms . . . But they paid . . . a price . . . The one who cut it . . . got it a lot worse . . . than the one who didn't . . . The god doesn't take kindly . . . to being touched by outsiders."

"Where's the god?"

"In further . . . in its shrine . . .Walk in any direction you like . . . and you'll get there."

"What happened to the assassins?"

The suckling coughed, and then the light faded from his eyes.

"Come on!" the hoarse voice shouted at him, and the light returned.

"The two of them . . . were sent flying . . . Think they're still . . . inside the fortress . . . I don't know . . . But I'm sure . . . they're not right in the head . . . The god will punish them . . . But don't worry . . . *He* will make everybody . . . stronger . . . instead of me."

"Everybody—you mean the group in the treatment center?" D asked. His voice alone was enough to put a rapturous glow on the suckling's face.

"That's . . . right."

"Who is *he*?"

"You'll see . . . soon. I was going . . . to save everybody . . . Make use of . . . the god's power . . . but now I can't . . . So he has to . . . You know . . . I never wanted . . . to be a damned suckling . . . But I got bit by that vampire . . . out in the

woods . . . Never should've gone through the woods . . . in the evening . . . I just wanted . . . to give her . . . to give . . ."

His voice suddenly dropped. He mumbled something, apparently a woman's name.

"I did chores all over the village . . . and with the money I earned . . . I wanted to give her a present . . ."

And on the way to deliver it, he'd been turned into a suckling. His expression, which still held some of the innocence of youth, swiftly changed—becoming an intense look as he jumped up. Reaching out toward D with both hands, he shouted, "Everybody should end up like me. All of them should be sucklings! I've—I've made arrangements . . ."

And saying this, he fell backward. He gently came to rest on the ground, as D's right hand had caught him behind the head, supporting him. The light was rapidly fading from the suckling's eyes.

"Death's come back for him," the hoarse voice said.

But in the end, the suckling said one last thing: "I've made arrangements."

His body twitched violently—and then went limp.

Taking his hand away, D stood up.

"I really hate to ask this, but what are you gonna do?"

Not replying to the hoarse voice, D started walking again. The hem of his coat fluttered out around him like the wings of a supernatural bird. He didn't give the suckling another glance.

THE GOD’S OFFER

CHAPTER 6

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I

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The weird voice had resounded through everyone's heads. All of them but Toto had leapt out of bed, and when Jan rushed into the recovery room to see what was going on, he'd found Weizmann all over Maria. Maria hadn't said a word, Jan had gotten a good laugh out of the situation, and Bierce had ignored it, but the young officer's pride had been sorely wounded, so that he now sat despondently in one corner of the treatment center, hugging his knees. The other three agreed that the voice must've come from the "god" D had mentioned, but at some point the Hunter had disappeared, apparently leaving Bierce in charge.

"This floor, those above it, and those below have all been thoroughly destroyed. In other words, it doesn't matter where we go. Our only choice is to wait here until D gets back," said the warrior.

And so it was decided that Jan would stand in the corridor as a lookout, while Bierce served as a guard inside the room.

"So, what happens now?" Maria said in the treatment center, heaving a sigh. "What in the world was that Hunter thinking, just strolling into the home of a god the Nobility worshiped? For that matter, what were *we* thinking when we followed him?"

Bierce, who was leaning back against the wall, gave her a long look and told her, "Get some sleep."

"Not on your life. I'm not safe with that deviant around."

Her look of derision fell on Weizmann, who still sat hugging his knees.

Looking up at Maria, he shouted, "Wh—what's that? That's a shitty thing to say, you lousy whore. You said you were fine with it!"

"Whatever could you be talking about, you freak? I'll have you know I used to

work in the most popular saloon in Shoala, the biggest city in the whole southern Frontier. Why would I let myself be smooth talked by a little pissant like you?”

“You bitch—you said you wanted fifty dalas, didn’t you? Why, that’s—that’s what a top-grade hooker makes. That’s far too expensive!”

“Now, now,” Bierce said with a wry grin, “is that any way for an official from the Capital to be using funds? You also seem pretty well versed in these matters.”

“D—don’t be ridiculous,” Weizmann stammered. “My record as a public servant is spotless. When I go out to be entertained, it’s always on my own coin. Which reminds me—I’d better be getting a receipt out of you!”

“That’s hardly anything to be bragging about, you idiot,” Maria said, sticking her tongue out at him. “You little government pissant. I’ve never heard of a man asking for a receipt for bedding a lady, you low-down, filthy, twisted fuck!”

“You—you slut!” Weizmann exclaimed, jumping up.

Maria immediately braced herself for action, making it clear she was ready to go at it with him, tooth and nail.

Just as the room filled with the will to fight and kill, there was a hard rap at the door. Both of them froze.

“What is it?” Bierce called, one hand cupped by his mouth. Surprisingly enough, his voice seemed to come from the opposite side of the doorway. By throwing his voice, he’d still be safe if someone tried to shoot him through the door

“It’s me. He’s come back!”

It was Jan’s voice.

Maria and Weizmann stared in disbelief.

Bierce asked, “Who, the suckling?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Let me in, would you?”

The moment Bierce undid the lock, Jan came flying in. Shooting a glance at Bierce, he quickly returned his eyes to the corridor.

“Well, what do you know!” Bierce said, his tone one of mixed emotions.

Jan jumped off to one side, and a thin figure walked in between the two men as if he were some celebrity who knew he wouldn’t be turned away, even though he hadn’t been invited.

“Sorry for all the fuss,” Mr. Stow said, raising one hand in greeting as Maria and Weizmann stared at him in a daze.

“Pardon me,” he said, but before he could take a step forward he found Bierce blocking his way.

As the old man looked up at him sleepily, the warrior asked, “You left with the suckling, didn’t you?” Though his expression was the same as always, none of them had ever heard this icy tone from him before. Was it the voice of a warrior?

The old man’s expression didn’t change. There was something strange about that, but those around him didn’t seem to notice.

“When D left, he gave us instructions to kill the suckling as soon as we saw him. Since you went with him, I wonder what we should do with you?”

“Do you intend to . . . kill me?”

Bierce stood a head taller than the old man. Looking down at him like some overhanging cliff, his eyes seemed to bore right through Mr. Stow. Undoubtedly he was weighing how to deal with this old man in light of his experience as a warrior and all his instincts. His eyes had a fierce glint in them.

The trio watched in shock.

“Sorry,” Bierce said, his hand drawing an arrow from his quiver.

No one was going to stop him. They all found what he was doing perfectly justifiable.

The old man waited, motionless, but without a trace of fear.

“Wait,” Weizmann called out to the warrior, his tone feeble.

Bierce ignored him.

Every one of them could picture the scene a second or two away, when the old man would fall to the floor with an iron arrow through his heart.

Just then, they heard a voice call out, “Dear!”

Jan and Weizmann shut their eyes as if to say, *Damn*, and a hint of relief skimmed across Maria’s face. An unforeseen player had won the day.

Everyone turned to see Mrs. Stow standing at the entrance to the recovery room. Thanks to the medicine, the fever had left her, but her sickly visage was still haggard.

Raising a hand that was like a withered tree branch, she said, “Dear . . . So, you came back?”

“Honey—I’m right here!”

Before Bierce could stop him, the old man slipped past him to stand before his wife.

Maria looked at Bierce. As husband and wife breathlessly threw their arms around one another, the warrior’s hand aimed its metallic death. Was he going to kill them both?

“Stop it!” the woman shouted in spite of herself, but her cry was shattered by a terrific impact.

All of them were thrown against the wall.

“The Sacred Ancestor’s army is attacking!” Jan shouted. Rather than the back that’d taken the blow, he was clutching his belly.

“That god thingy must’ve bitten the dust after all. So now—”

“If it’d bitten the dust, they wouldn’t have to attack, now would they, pervert?”

As she, too, clutched her stomach, Maria suddenly remembered something. Crying out Toto’s name, she headed for the recovery room.

“There’s an evacuation shelter in the third subbasement,” Bierce said, pointing toward the door. “We’d better move while the elevator still works. We’re relocating immediately. Don’t forget the food and medicine!”

Jan and Weizmann ran over to the container by the wall. When Bierce turned to look for the elderly couple, out of the corner of his eye he caught a pair of figures slipping out the doorway. Clucking his tongue, he followed them.

As soon as the warrior was through the door, he came to a halt. In the middle of the hallway the Stows had frozen in place, still facing the great elevator to the left. About fifty yards ahead of them stood a diminutive figure. In gray apparel that was wrapped like a toga, the figure had a small, girlish face. However, the tight muscles beneath the bronzed skin and heavy lips were those of a man—actually, a boy.

A hard sound and a faint rattling reached Bierce's ears. The elderly couple was shaking. The noise was that of their teeth chattering as they held each other tight.

"You're in league with Clulu," the boy said. His voice was like ice.

Clulu—is that the name of that god? Bierce thought. *This punk's gotta be one of the three assassins I saw earlier.*

"We're not in league with it. It's just that our skybus crashed and we wound up here through no choice of our own."

"If you're here, you're in league with Clulu," the boy murmured.

His mouth opened. Every one of his teeth tapered like a fang.

The boy pounced. He sailed slowly through the air toward the elderly couple. But he stopped in front of them, as if he'd been physically struck, and slammed against the wall. Piercing him through the temple and side was a pair of arrows that pinned him to the stone wall.

Bierce didn't think he'd won yet. He had to slay an assassin specially chosen from the Sacred Ancestor's army. Would the abilities of a common warrior really count for anything against someone like that?

"Run for it!" the warrior shouted at the still-rooted couple, pointing toward the elevator. The image of the husband and wife clinging to each other and trembling was burned into his retinas.

As the Stows broke into a run, Jan and Maria ran out of the room. Jan had the

container of food in one hand and their store of medicine in the other, while Maria carried Toto.

"So, is *this* the bastard?" Jan shouted on seeing the impaled boy. "I'll give you a hand with him!"

"Get moving!" Bierce shouted at them as well, pointing to the elevator. This wasn't someone a mobster could handle.

When the two men broke into a run, a pair of arrows jabbed into the floor by their feet. The sound of them whistling through the air didn't come until later. Before Bierce noticed that these were the two iron arrows he'd put through the boy, the little form popped up in front of him—landing not three feet away.

"Let's play," the boy said, sticking his right hand into the chest of his garment. When it came out again, his little fist held a disproportionately large doll.

The boy's mouth snapped open as far as it would go, his white fangs glistened, and then he bit down on the right shoulder of the doll. With one bite he took the arm off.

Bierce screamed. Unseen fangs had sunk deep into his right shoulder. He had the sensation of them tearing through flesh and tendon and bone, and then ripping his right arm free with a shake of those jaws. Still, he swung his left arm, and a trio of arrows penetrated the boy between the eyes, through the throat, and through the heart. They were still sticking out of the boy as he smiled broadly.

"It's almost that time," the boy said. His fangs jutted from his mouth, sinking into the neck of the doll—and that of Bierce.

At that moment, both their bodies were sent sailing through the air with terrific force. Powerless, the assassin flew down the corridor. The wind that the god's cries of pain had become—the same unholy two-thousand-mile-per-hour gale that D and his left hand had hidden from in the god's tentacle—was now blowing through the fortress's interior.

The rock wall was drawing closer. Though the warrior tried to push away from it with his right hand, the limb wouldn't move. As he felt the right half of his face being crushed, Bierce lost consciousness.

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II

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The road didn't appear to have an end. A dimension that twisted back on itself, a maze, sprang to mind, but apparently this road was different. All of this was the god's abode. Nevertheless, D's pace didn't slacken, and no hint of fatigue could be seen in his handsome features. Even now, the solitary Hunter pushed ahead.

"What's this?" the hoarse voice bubbled up.

It'd seen the line that rose obliquely from the stone floor far down the cobblestone road. From the shape of it, it was a longsword.

"Hmm, is that—tell me it's not what I think it is," the left hand said in a contemplative tone.

Presently, D stood beside it. Including the portion that was sunken into the stone floor, the longsword had to have been over twice as long and wide as D's blade. The creature that adorned its hilt and guard was a dragon.

"This is the Sacred Ancestor's sword," D said.

"Wow. In that case, this must be . . ."

A sudden wind struck D's face.

"This was the battlefield—where the Sacred Ancestor and the god fought." As impossible as it seemed, the left hand, apparently gripped by fear, fell silent. After a pause, it said, "There's no sign of the god's corpse."

"Yes, there is."

"What?"

Its surprise was out of place in this eternal world, and the wind made a stirring sound.

"It's under this," D said, his gaze trained on the paving stones.

After a bit, the hoarse voice said, "Then that means the god was defeated,

doesn’t it?”

“At the very least, it can’t move. If it could, the Sacred Ancestor’s army would’ve long since been swept away.”

“This is its grave? And that sword is a headstone?”

“Do you think a god can die?” D asked.

“What?”

“Let’s go,” D said, his eyes already focused far off in the distance.

“Hey, wait just a minute!” the hoarse voice said in an agitated tone. “If the god is under here and it still clings to life, isn’t this a golden opportunity? All you have to do is drive that sword in. The Sacred Ancestor’s sword. It’d be killed for sure, right?”

“I could do that.”

“Th—then why *don’t* you?” the hoarse voice stammered.

“The god is close.”

“What?”

The soles of the Hunter’s boots trod across the stone pavement.

“But that’s not my job.”

He must’ve been referring to the Sacred Ancestor’s ancient battle, which he was now walking away from.

“There you go, being pigheaded again. Make it easy for yourself—hell, why don’t you make it easy for *me*?”

The left hand knew there was no use ranting. But it continued its harangue just the same.

“You know, you’re always so—”

The tiny mouth that opened in the palm of the Hunter’s hand was merely getting started, but just then a voice rained down from the heavens.

You’ve done well to come here. This place was supposed to be sealed away, but it would seem you managed to break those seals, didn’t you?

The left hand let out a surprised groan—the voice pouring down on them was

that cruel and horrible.

"Are you the god?" D asked, staring up into space. Apparently this young man could see things that weren't there.

There are those who call me that—or rather, there were.

"Where are you?"

This was D's sole concern.

Everywhere. Think of your favorite place. I am there.

Nothing from the Hunter.

Why didn't you drive the sword into me? The truth is just as you said.

"I already answered that. If you aren't going to come out, I'm leaving."

Fine. I'll show myself. But in return, I want you to agree to do something for me.

"No deal."

Don't be that way, it said in a voice that carried faint traces of laughter. *Knowing that I've lost my arm, the enemy intends to attack at full force. They have weapons capable of destroying this shrine. Eliminate them.*

"It's telling you what to do!" the hoarse voice remarked with disgust. "A god that gives orders? You're used to being pampered, aren't you?"

If you can do that, I'll meet with you.

"Oh, that's an awfully big thing of you to say. Why'd you decide to do that, god? *Aaah!*"

The cry from D's left hand was due to the overwhelming malice and rage that had slammed against every inch of the Hunter.

You're just like him, the god said in a tone of loathing. *The one being who came to me—you're just like him. You realize that, don't you? However, he couldn't deal the coup de grâce. Can you?*

"That's why I came here," D said softly. But amidst the maddened howls of the ever-growing wind, his voice still rang out like pure ice.

The floor shook ever so slightly.

They've resumed their attack. The darkness is truly their world. The humans are trying to flee. Scorn entered the god's voice. *I appeared because you didn't rely on what* he *had done. We need to settle matters between us. After you stop the attack from outside, that is. Then you should come again.*

A second later, darkness pressed in around D. It immediately cleared.

"Where the blazes are we?" asked the hoarse voice.

Crouching down, D tried to assess the situation. A glowing sphere had just passed overhead.

"That's a recon globe," the hoarse voice said in the absolute lowest of whispers.

To the Hunter's right, innumerable figures were milling about above him. And also on his right—the sound of water. It was the river. D was in the gully that the river had carved. In which case, those atop the bank would be the Sacred Ancestor's army. Since countless lights covered both banks, they threw illumination both on the river's surface and up toward the sky, while among them flitted several glowing spheres resembling the recon globe that'd just passed by.

"Odd, aren't they? The Nobility, I mean. Light can cost them their lives, but they're still obsessed with it. Or is it just that they want to imitate humans? They even worked it into their machines."

The nocturnal Nobility had no need for light. They could see as well at night as humans could when walking around in broad daylight. Moreover, 99 percent of their forces were synthetic humans. Perfect machines and technologically enhanced bio-men alike needed no light sources to assist their vision. Yet the fact that the Nobles had lights burning everywhere was in keeping with the hoarse voice's second assertion—that they were imitating humans, as many scholars agreed. Though they regarded human beings as lower than insects and were themselves imbued with all the self-confidence and pride their ageless and immortal form could inspire, the Nobility still kept up this completely unnecessary mimicry of humanity. The solution offered by psychologists studying Nobles and humans was in keeping with the left hand's opinion: The Nobility had

a profound adoration of the human race.

At present, however, that sentimentality was only complicating D's situation.

Off in the distance, there was a heavy sound like a bell tolling.

"That's it," the left hand whispered, but by this point D was already weaving a path through the recon globes and scrambling up the earthen bank. It wasn't a gentle slope he was climbing, but rather an almost-vertical wall—in fact, he might've chosen that overhang to conceal him from the eyes of the enemy.

At the top of the gully, there were rows of countless synthetic combatants, ranging in type from humanoid to fortresslike. Though all were equipped with green eyes, those eyes would never register any emotion at the scenes conveyed to their electronic brains.

Reaching the top of the gully, D began to weave through the robots like the wind. They and the recon globes constantly scanned in all directions. No matter how swift D might be, he could never elude them.

The pendant on D's chest gave off a blue glow.

At some point, he'd come into the thick of enormous mollusk-like constructs. One of them quaked. An indentation formed about a third of the way up it, a head and four limbs took shape, and in less than two seconds' time it produced nearly a dozen men. They had no eyes, noses, or mouths, and while their fingers hadn't formed yet, they did soon enough. The featureless, semitransparent figures joined the rest of the ranks, vanishing into the darkness.

"They're changing shifts," the hoarse voice noted.

Unlike robots or cyborgs, these synthesized humans returned to their original state when they weren't on duty. That was the mollusk-like mountain.

"Are they lookouts or part of an attack? Whatever the case, leave it to the people who could move a planet or two to fall back on old-fashioned methods like sending out wave after wave of bodies to do battle. I just can't figure those Nobles out."

The voice flowed on the breeze, and less than a minute later the Hunter was in a position where he could see a colossal dome guarded by several rings of

sentries. Lasers and searchlights shone on its gray walls, sliding across its sloping exterior.

“So, there are automatons in addition to the synthetic humans. There’ll be trouble if they find us.”

Not waiting for his left hand to finish speaking, D weaved between the gleaming black mecha men and went straight to the dome. When a squad of synthetic humans came along, he pressed himself up against its wall and became one with the darkness. Even after the guards had passed, D didn’t come back down to the ground, but rather slipped along the curve of the wall.

After running about two hundred yards, he halted.

“Okay, this is good,” the hoarse voice decided. D must’ve found an entrance.

A black-gloved hand touched a spot on the wall. Without a sound, a perfect circle six feet in diameter opened in it.

Climbing down off the wall, D reached for the sword on his back with his right hand, then twisted his upper body around to his right, swinging his blade low.

Split from the head to the chest, tumbling backward, was a synthetic human carrying a stafflike weapon. Two arrows jutted from him, one through his throat, and the other through his heart.

“That you, D?” a voice called out to him, and then Bierce popped from the darkness.

“What are you doing?” D asked, his tone and the look in his eye fit for addressing the enemy. This man wasn’t supposed to be out here.

As he scanned his surroundings, Bierce said, “It’s like this: As soon as the enemy assault started up again, an assassin from the Sacred Ancestor’s army came after us. I couldn’t take him, but at the last minute an incredible wind came through, and we were blown all around. I blacked out after I hit a stone wall, but somehow we managed to escape. Everyone’s in the underground shelter. But if this attack keeps up, the fortress won’t last till morning. So I came out here to destroy their weapons.”

“Alone?”

“That’s right. The rest of ’em wouldn’t be any use.”

“How’d you make it this far?”

“I was kinda worried about that too, but once I started, it was easier than I expected. Thanks to *this*.”

He stuck out his left wrist and turned it over. What he wore looked like a wristwatch or an ultracompact device for monitoring vital signs.

“It’s a sensor guard. It might not be much to look at, but its performance is top notch. As far as those androids’ eyes are concerned, I’m an invisible man.”

D glanced at the warrior’s wrist, and then turned around. Bierce was about to tell him to wait, but instead he just grinned wryly and followed the Hunter.

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III

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After Bierce went through, the circle immediately closed. Discarding the corpse of the synthetic man he’d cut down, D pointed straight ahead. On top of a tremendous ten-foot-high dais, a lone man sat in a chair. Right in front of him loomed a construct that closely resembled a silver jungle gym, and the man wore an exhausted expression as he leaned back in his seat. A hand protruded from one sleeve of his long, dark blue robe, and it gripped a glowing metallic rod.

“What’s he doing?” Bierce couldn’t help but ask.

“You’ll see soon enough. Mind your surroundings.”

Not the least bit angered by D’s curt reply, Bierce looked around. At least this was better than being treated like dead weight. It was at that instant that he sensed a cold presence to his rear. As Bierce turned, an iron arrow flew from his right hand like a red shooting star.

What it penetrated was a pale shadow. The shadow shook just a little, and the arrow jabbed into the wall behind it. The pale shadow had a face and a form.

Clad in gleaming black armor, he bared white fangs.

It's a Noble!

Bierce's body stiffened with terror. Although he'd lived as a warrior for nearly forty years, this was his first time encountering an actual Noble.

Throwing arrows won't do any good. The thought filled him with panic and rendered him immobile.

Drawing a longsword from his hip, the pale Noble glided closer. Bierce was certain the blade was genuine. When it swung at the left side of his neck, he closed his eyes and imagined the pain of it slicing clean through the bone.

He heard a *chiiiing!*

The warrior's eyes opened. Not only had the blade been parried, it'd positively been batted away, and the pale ghost was reeling backward. The attacker didn't even have a chance to straighten himself up before D drove his sword straight through his heart.

The Noble grinned.

"That's a ghost!" Bierce shouted.

"We know," a hoarse voice replied, making Bierce's eyes widen.

The Noble came in for another strike. Never before had Bierce witnessed such swordplay. There was no comparing the average warrior to the strength and speed of this opponent. He couldn't help but think that even the Hunter was outclassed. However, when their blades clanged together for a second time and the combatants switched positions, D made a great leap. Even Bierce could see that the Noble was too slow. As D passed, his weapon poised for a new blow straight to his foe's heart, the Noble was still frozen in place. Pale blood gushed first not from his chest but from his solar plexus, and then the ghostly Noble was reduced to a collapsing mass of pale blue light.

"You couldn't cut it at first, so why'd it work this time?"

In reply to Bierce's query, the same hoarse voice said, "We got into a different frame of mind."

There were indications of ghosts coming up behind the warrior. When Bierce

turned his head, two more were charging toward him. One of them had a sword, but the other carried a great ax with a blade almost three feet long.

"Head to the top," D said. "That machine is what's attacking the fortress. Take it out."

Behind D an iron staircase climbed upward.

Slipping past the warrior, D was ready to meet the approaching enemies.

Bierce ran for the stairs. To his rear, he heard the echoes of blade meeting blade. Grabbing the handrail and taking the steps four or five at a time, he still snuck a look back.

D was squaring off against the one carrying the great ax. A pale blue stain spread at the Hunter's feet.

Bierce swallowed hard, thinking, *He's already slain one of those Nobles?*

The great ax came at D. Moving with ungodly speed, the heavy blade was little more than a gleaming blur in Bierce's eyes. The single ax appeared to streak for both the opponent's neck and legs at the same time. Bierce was horrified.

D blocked all of the attacks—it was a battle between gleaming streaks and arcs. D's blade repelled each of the blows that seemed to be coming simultaneously, the Hunter towering like a black wall, his feet never moving an inch from where he'd first planted them.

For a second, the enemy's onslaught slackened.

Has he gotten sick of this? Bierce wondered.

The great ax was pulled back. When the expected attack didn't come, D used the opening to strike with his sword. The second Bierce saw the Hunter's blade bursting from the back of the ghost, the pale figure collapsed.

D looked at the warrior. Feeling a dread greater than anything the ghosts could inspire, Bierce raced up the stairs.

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The warrior reached the top of the device.

The man reclining in the chair sat up and looked at the warrior. He had the

same pale face as a Noble, the lifeless eyes, sunken cheeks, and fangs poking from his lips—he was indeed a ghost.

Gripping an arrow in his right hand, Bierce grew stiff. A stunning power struck every inch of him. Thrown ten feet, he managed to shield his head as he rolled across the floor, and by then he knew what it'd been.

"A force field, eh?"

"That's right," the hoarse voice said overhead.

D moved forward, stopping just shy of where Bierce had been thrown back and striking the unseen wall with his sword. It was knocked back with just as much speed.

"The Nobility's force fields draw on the power that moves the Milky Way. Only the Sacred Ancestor can break through them!" Bierce blurted out, repeating the information he'd been told by an aged Hunter long ago, but then he realized this young man would already know that. At the same time, a thought occurred to him that filled him with both fear and denial: *D will manage something, won't he?*

Up ahead of them, the man in the chair moved. With the metallic rods he held, he delivered a series of blows to the construct before him. Each time he hit it, the construct shook and its shape changed. He was altering the positions of the cylinders that defined its form. What had resembled a child's jungle gym transformed into a shape reminiscent of a model of a molecule, then into a geometrical pattern that called to mind a spider's web. All the while, the man kept moving both hands without a moment's rest. He seemed possessed, like an impassioned conductor.

"*The Mysterious Symphony—Movement of Destruction*," the hoarse voice murmured. "This is no good. You've gotta stop him before he finishes his directions. If you don't, the fortress will be—"

The voice never got to finish what it was saying. D held up his left hand.

Bierce felt the air start to flow toward it. The flow became a rustle, which became a breeze, which turned into a gale.

"Grab hold of something."

Even before D said this, the warrior had run over to the stairway and latched onto the railing with both hands. His body rose into the air. With terrific force he was being drawn toward D—and the left hand he'd extended. His shoulders, his elbows, and his wrists all cried out in unison. Muscle and tendon were stretched to the limit.

What, does he plan on sucking up the force field?

The warrior began to slide. His fingers were slipping. Without even a chance to cry out, Bierce sailed through the air . . . and fell to the ground. His eyes were open.

The Noble in the chair raised both his batons. The deadly music was headed toward its climax. But he was challenged by a streak of black lightning. The batons swung down.

A silvery flash swept out horizontally. Something flew through the air. Hands gripping batons—and a head!

Bierce saw the construct falling to pieces.

"That's all there was?"

"Just the one," the hoarse voice replied.

D headed for the stairs. Without halting, he asked Bierce, "Can you stand?"

"I'll manage," he replied, but by that point D had already started down the stairs. Bierce didn't complain. He hadn't been of any use at all, and they had to hurry up and get out of there before the enemy came. But despite that thought, Bierce couldn't get to his feet for a long time.

On exiting the dome, the warrior was surprised. Astride a cyborg horse, D handed him the reins to another steed, and then galloped off.

The power of the god opened a path through the defenses and the main gates with ease as the two riders approached.

The group had taken refuge in the third subbasement. On seeing the pair who now returned, they all cheered.

“Where’d you two meet up?” Jan asked. The others were wondering the same thing. “By the way—did you take care of that god thing?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

The members of the group let out a collective sigh of despair.

“What the *hell*? Then you mean we can’t get outta here yet? Well, I don’t care; I might just take off on my own. Floating down that underground river should do the trick.”

D turned and looked at Jan, who was grinning like a fool.

Jan threw out his chest with a hearty laugh. “What’s that look for? You think all you’ve gotta do is glare at me and I’ll get all scared, stud?”

But his haughty laughter quickly faded. D was still staring at him.

A little hoarse voice said, “He’s possessed.”

Though the people there looked dubious, the next thing D said would change their expressions.

“The suckling’s dead. Did the old man come back?”

“Yeah,” Maria said with a nod.

“Where is he?”

“Over there—in the bed in the back.”

Just then, the old woman called out, “Dear.” Sitting up in bed, Mrs. Stow clung to her husband’s arm as he got to his feet.

The old man was staring at the group with gleaming eyes. The light that came from them was crimson.

“You shouldn’t have come back,” D said in a low voice, taking a step toward the elderly couple like death in black.

THE CHANGED

CHAPTER 7

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I

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For every step forward D took, Mr. Stow backed away one. The old man pulled free of his wife's hand. Once the Hunter considered someone his foe, the unlucky one's age or sex no longer mattered—such was the young man called D.

"The suckling said he'd made arrangements to change everyone, to make them more like him. Are you what he had in mind?"

From the vicinity of D's left hand, an unconscious chuckle arose, but no one else noticed.

"Dear," Mrs. Stow called out sadly from her place on the bed. There was nothing the woman could do.

The old man and D both ignored her.

"Have you got it in you?" Mr. Stow asked, coughing. "Can you cut me down? Could you destroy a poor old man? Sure, I got the god's power through the suckling."

Behind D, the rest of the group exchanged glances.

"I should thank you, Mr. Hunter. For bringing me here—to the great god. You know what I'm going to do next? Once I make it out of this fortress, I'm going to the Capital. Then I'm going to kill my sons for living without a care in the world, instead of looking after their mother and father. These same ingrates have forgotten all about how hard my wife and I worked to bring them up, and they don't even try to hide how inconvenienced they feel when we make our yearly call on them."

The old man chortled. Coming from such an upstanding face, a laugh so malicious and despicable seemed unimaginable.

It was countered by a cry some would describe as heart wrenching.

“Please, dear! Don’t ruin everything we’ve made,” his wife said, climbing down from the bed. Her face still pale, her gait unsteady, she walked toward her husband, speaking in a hoarse voice.

“Our children have their own lives. Anything that tries to intrude on that is a disturbance. They’ve all settled into their own place in life, and there’s no room for their parents to fit in. We didn’t raise our children just so that they could repay our kindness, did we?”

Suddenly, the old man flew back. Because he hadn’t given any hint that he’d do so, D was a heartbeat too slow in drawing and striking with his blade. Dragged through a pale mist, the old man was swallowed by a distant wall.

“Franz! My dear . . .” Mrs. Stow sobbed, reaching out with both arms. “Where . . . where is this supposed *god*? Where can I find the god who did this to my husband? What kind of god would *do* something like that?”

Halting, the old woman turned and looked.

D was right there.

“This god the Nobles worshiped—what’s it like? I’ll kill it—just tell me!”

Mrs. Stow pounded D’s chest with both hands. Over and over she hit him, as hard as she could, with every ounce of rage and hate her body held. D’s chest shook only the tiniest bit. That was all she accomplished.

“Tell me! You brought us here—you led us to this god, didn’t you? Well, bring me to it. I’ll kill it!”

The sound of the fists striking began to fade. The old woman’s knees buckled, and she sank to the floor. But as she did, she continued to pound D’s stomach, then his thighs.

When the old woman’s hands finally fell by her sides, D turned to the group and asked, “When did her husband get back?”

“About three hours after we heard that voice.”

“Three hours ago.”

All that time, the god's pawn had been with the group. Or rather, it might've been more accurate to say the group had been left with *him*.

"The suckling told me something. He said you were all going to become like him. That he'd made arrangements."

"Just what are you trying to say?" asked Bierce.

Without replying, D sheathed his sword.

"Mr. Stow was changed by that god thing. You think we were, too?"

"We hardly talked to Mr. Stow at all; right, everybody?" said Maria.

"Damn straight," Jan agreed. "The same goes for you, doesn't it, kid?"

Looking at them from the bed, the boy nodded his little head.

When D looked at them, Bierce shrugged his shoulders, while Weizmann frantically waved his hands.

"I can tell you this much," Maria said, her lips twisting. "This so-called *god* is sick. I think it's rotten to the core. After all, this was one of the Nobility's gods. It probably creeps into the weakest parts of you and starts boasting about its power. And then the god comes right out and tells you how weak you are. Not that anyone could deny that—human beings really *are* weak. That's when it offers something really sweet, like suggesting it'll perform a miracle or saying it'll save you. That's all it takes. After you've been shown in sickening detail how low you are, what utter scum, you would jump at the offer. After all, a real god is supposed to save you. That's how Mr. Stow got changed. But is it necessarily his fault? Any one of us might've ended up the same way if that god whispered to us. So, I've just gotta say . . . what's so bad about that?"

Maria was on the verge of tears.

No one responded to her words. There was no need to. They all knew what she'd said was true.

From the vicinity of D's left hand, a voice he alone heard said, "Someone here's not telling the truth. You gonna put them all down?"

Not replying to this, D said to the group, "Outside assassins still remain. And the god hasn't been destroyed. I'm heading out again."

“Give ’em hell,” Bierce told the Hunter. But there was a ring of fear to his words.

“What kind of god is this thing supposed to be? What’d the Nobles want from it?”

“Destruction,” D replied, and that reply in itself was a miracle.

“What?”

“The god in this fortress was a god of destruction. And the Nobles intended to enlist its aid in dying—or in their case, being destroyed.”

“You can’t be serious. Why would they do that?” Maria asked, her eyes wide.

“Ageless and immortal Nobles wanting to kick the bucket? I don’t believe that shit!” said Jan.

Seated on the bed, Mrs. Stow was also stunned.

D looked around the group. All of them turned away from his quiet, deep eyes.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to be a Noble?”

At this question, they all looked at each other as if their souls had been laid bare.

“Not a chance in hell.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Weizmann.

D continued frostily, “To never grow old, never die—those are the sort of things some humans would find attractive. However, for the Nobility, they seem in one sense to be undesirable. Many Nobles noted in their writings that eternal life is nothing to be envied.”

“I don’t get it. Tell me: can an ageless and immortal creature die? Yes—all you have to do is stab them through the heart or cut off their head. So, why’d they need this god of theirs, then?” asked Maria.

“Apparently it’s not easy for them to destroy themselves,” said D. “This god wouldn’t destroy them, either—they were immortal, after all. But then something occurred to them. They could have their god destroy the world.”

“You mean . . . they wanted the human race to be annihilated, right?” Weizmann said, his lips trembling. “The Nobles, needing to drink human blood, would be wiped out, too. That’s the craziest idea ever. I can see why the Sacred Ancestor put a stop to them.”

“D, can you slay this god?” Bierce inquired anxiously.

He got an honest answer: “I don’t know.”

“Okay, I’ve had enough of this!” Jan shouted, consulting his wristwatch. “We can’t rely on this clown any longer. It’ll be dawn soon. The Sacred Ancestor’s army will probably rest by day. If so, we should get out of here. I’m going!”

“Gained some confidence, did you?”

D’s words froze not only Jan, but everyone there.

As looks that beggared description focused on him, Jan frantically replied, “What the hell are you all looking at me like that for? You think I turned into a suckling or something? Look! There isn’t a bite mark on me anywhere, see?”

Though he showed them his neck, the looks they gave him didn’t change at all. Once suspicions involving the Nobility were aroused by someone, even the smallest doubt was difficult to overlook.

A stark gleam flashed over the mobster’s head.

“Holy shit!” Jan cried, cowering as D’s sword halted literally a hair’s breadth from his skull.

When D sheathed his weapon, an air of relief surged into the suffocating space.

“You know, D,” Bierce called over to the Hunter, “I’m not gonna take Jan’s side or anything, but where we’re concerned, there’s definitely something to what he says. Waiting around any longer for you to slay this god thing just puts the rest of us in danger. Is there an escape route?”

“If there were, I’d have told you about it from the start.”

“That means we’d be left trying to slip through the siege army on our own. That’s a serious problem. Guess we’ll have to wait, after all.”

“You say that like it’s no big deal!” Jan shouted.

“Yes, what do we do if the Sacred Ancestor’s army invades? They’d break into this evacuation shelter in no time flat. Let’s get out of here,” Weizmann said, siding with the mobster.

“You think *that* will go any better?” Bierce said, his cold tone silencing the other two men.

There was a sharp sound. Someone had clapped her hands together. It’d come from the direction of the bed. Toto lay on it, while Maria stood beside it.

“It’s fine for you guys to make a run for it, but think about the kid and the old lady. You in particular, Mr. Transport Officer. Don’t you have a responsibility to these two?”

A slight shaking reached the group.

“The attack has resumed,” D said. “I’m heading out to take care of it. I advise you to wait here until I’m done. It’s up to you to decide whether you’ll do that or not.”

Silence descended.

“There is one thing you could do,” said D.

“What’s that?” Maria inquired, her eyes wide. “Why didn’t you tell us earlier, if that’s—”

“Do you want to come with me to go see the god?”

This time, every jaw in the room dropped.

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II

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Naturally, it was the hoarse voice that whispered, “They’ll just be in the way! You can see to the group after you’ve disposed of that god. No sense fretting over them now. You know, sometimes you really—”

In response to this, a voice from on high suddenly said, *Most interesting.*

Letting out a scream, Maria hugged the boy closer.

Everyone looked up at the ceiling. At some point it'd turned pitch black. Before it had been less than fifteen feet high; now all of them realized that the darkness stretched into infinity.

"The god's come, has it?" Bierce asked, unsteady on his feet.

Well done. You have the same sort of power as the one who vanquished me. I shall keep my word to you as a god. At present, I'm on the roof of my sanctum. Come here. Whether you win or lose, I'll transport the humans wherever they desire. However, it's a hard road.

"You promised you'd fight me," said the Hunter. "Send the rest of them away right now."

Are you certain that's what you want to do? Once you're not around, the other two assassins might attack here. You see, they know that human gave you some assistance.

"You blabbed to them, didn't you?" the hoarse voice said.

There were indications that whatever lurked in the depths of the ceiling's darkness laughed at this without making a sound.

I'll be waiting—whether you come alone or bring your companions with you.

The ash-gray ceiling reappeared. Streaks of black like the threads of a spider's web shot through it.

"It's cracking—get out!"

As D said this, chunks of concrete rained down.

-

Maria looked reproachfully at the entrance to the evacuation shelter while the floor still trembled, then turned to face the group.

"Our food and medicine were still inside. Guess now we've got no choice but to go."

“Up on the roof, eh? Sounds close, but I bet it’ll take us a while,” Weizmann said, heaving a sigh. “Maria will have to look after the boy. Jan can take care of Mrs. Stow.”

“You’ve gotta be joking. Take care of her yourself!” Jan snapped, baring his teeth. “You were pretty quiet until a few minutes ago. What makes you so tough all of a sudden? Are you sure *you’re* not the one that old-timer recruited?”

“Come again?” Weizmann growled, his hand going for the motor gun by his hip.

Not to be outdone, Jan drew his broadsword.

Bierce clucked his tongue in disgust, but before he could come between them, Maria stepped forward. Even quicker, however, was the feeble voice that said, “Please, wait.”

Propped up against the stone wall, Mrs. Stow shot pained looks from one man to the other. The malice drained from their expressions.

“You needn’t worry about me. I’ll stay behind.”

“Don’t be silly, ma’am—we’re all going together,” Maria said, racing over to lend the old woman a shoulder to lean on.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Stow said, “You really do have a kind heart, don’t you? To be frank, I looked down on you at first. Working in a saloon, of all places! But you’ve been kinder to me than my own husband of fifty years. I don’t suppose you’ll believe me, but I just want to say that I really am—”

Maria hugged the woman’s gray head, saying, “It’s okay, I know. And now there’s no way on earth we’re leaving you behind. We’ll take you with us somehow or other. Can you stand?”

“Yes—I think so,” Mrs. Stow replied, nodding. Tears fell from her closed eyes. Obviously, she hadn’t really wanted to be left in such a place.

“Will you be able to walk?”

“Yes. At least, a little.”

“Then you’ll be fine. Okay, I’ll be taking Mrs. Stow. No one has a problem with that, do they?”

“No, that should be fine,” Bierce said.

“Do whatever you like. I’m having none of it,” Jan declared. “I’ve decided to light out of here by a different route than you folks.”

“Oh, and what route might that be?” Weizmann inquired.

“It’s a secret. I’ll be damned if I’ll have you, of all people, tagging along after me. At any rate, I’m going alone—you got anything to say about that, Mr. D?”

The mobster shut his mouth and watched as the figure in black slowly approached him.

“Wh—what the *hell*? You got a problem?”

“We can’t be sure you haven’t been given power by this god. And destroying the god is my job.”

A heartbeat later, Jan was twenty feet down the corridor. Everyone was left bug eyed by the superhuman bound.

“Just as I thought,” said the hoarse voice.

Jan’s eyes gave off blood light, and sharp fangs could be seen in his open mouth.

“You’re damned right. Thanks to the suckling and that old-timer, I’m better than ever. All you bastards treated me like some little piece-of-shit hoodlum. I was gonna circle around behind you and pick you off one by one, draining you dry. But now that you’re onto me, I have no choice. I’ll have to get rid of a couple of you right here and now.”

“Think you can?” the hoarse voice said with amusement.

“Oh, just watch me!”

After jerking back his broadsword, the mobster swung it down. His body glided forward. Or rather, his body stayed right where it was, but a pale duplicate of Jan slipped from it like a ghost. Though D’s blade mowed through its torso, the copy never stopped, striking with its broadsword at D’s left shoulder.

The blow was parried. The broadsword that should’ve stopped went right through the Hunter’s blade and sank into the base of D’s neck. Though not a

drop of blood was shed, D fell to one knee.

The new Jan grinned viciously. D ran right through him. His blade flashed out for Jan's actual form, standing straight behind the ghostly one.

Letting out a hair-raising scream, the new Jan flipped through the air with one hand still outstretched, and then vanished. Split in twain from the top of his head to the crotch, the real Jan fell to the floor in two pieces a moment later.

D sheathed his sword.

The rest of the group stared at him, their faces blank. Far more than Jan suddenly baring his fangs, it was D's skill with a sword that terrified them.

However, D was down on one knee again.

"What's wrong?" asked both Maria and Bierce.

"An illusion dealt this wound, but the pain seems real enough."

"Unbelievable!"

As if in response to Maria's remark, D got up again.

"Anyone else want to stay behind?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Weizmann said, his face pale as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay, let's go, you two," Maria said to the old woman and the boy.

They both got up.

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Because the elevator had stopped working, the group had no choice but to climb the stairs. After two floors the old woman was exhausted.

"I knew it. I can't do this. Please, go on without me."

Ignoring the old woman's weary and sorrowful plea, Maria let go of Toto's hand, bent down, and offered her back to Mrs. Stow.

"It's okay. If you're dead on your feet after two floors, there's no way you could climb up all the way. It's great that you made it this far."

“But I . . .”

The old woman’s mournful expression was eclipsed by a figure in black. Black arms wrapped around her slim waist, easily lifting the old woman and tossing her into the air to land on D’s back. Not only Maria but the other three as well stood in a daze as D began climbing the stairs without a word, the stunned old lady on his back.

Turning to Toto, Maria asked him, “Can you walk?”

“Sure,” the boy replied.

“Come what may, that guy will protect us. But you can’t depend on others to do everything for you. The only one who can take a helping hand from him,” Maria continued, lowering her voice, “is the old lady—got it?”

The boy nodded.

“Okay, let’s go then.”

“Sure thing.”

The two of them began to climb the stairs. They made no attempt to look back at the pair behind them.

Exchanging displeased glances, the men started up the stairs a moment later.

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When they reached the third floor, something white began to creep around D’s feet.

“Fog,” Maria murmured behind him.

It was billowing up through the floor.

“Be careful,” D said succinctly. Any remark from this young man, even a terse one, was a red alert. They knew perfectly well this wasn’t the kind of weather that gave rise to fog.

“Maria,” D called out.

“Uh, yes?”

“Catch!”

Now no more than a shadow, D went into motion, and Mrs. Stow flew through the air. It would have been a crazy way to pass her under any circumstances.

Barely making the catch, Maria was sent reeling by the old woman's momentum.

"Back downstairs!"

Turning back down the staircase on D's directions, the woman saw white fog climbing eerily.

"It's no use, D. There's fog down below, too!" Maria cried toward the cloud that had enveloped D, but then she gasped.

The fog was turning red.

"D!" she shouted, but Weizmann grabbed her by the arm.

"Hey! We've gotta go up!"

"No, D's in the fog—go help him!"

"Head up," Bierce said, clapping Maria on the shoulder. "And leave D to me . . ."

Maria saw Weizmann draw his motor gun. A look of disbelief spread across her face.

When the officer raised his weapon high, Bierce reacted to the killing lust. The warrior used his left hand to stop the barrel that was pointing at him. Its terrific impact was like a jackhammer. Still in the same pose he'd used to stop it, Bierce was driven to his knees. The scrawny government official had knocked the warrior down.

Delivering a light kick to his side, Weizmann sent Bierce sliding down the hall.

"You—you're . . ."

"Come with me. All three of you," Weizmann laughed.

A pair of fangs poked menacingly from his bright red lips.

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III

D felt the fog seeping into every inch of him. It was at that instant that his circulation changed. Spilling from his veins with terrible force, the blood gushed from his pores—or rather, it came out between the lining of his individual cells. Blood robbed him of his vision. His own blood.

At that moment, a vicious killing lust erupted up ahead of him. There was a metallic, eardrum-piercing clang and a shower of sparks as something vaulted over D's head and landed somewhere in the corridor. It was a foe whose surprise attack had been narrowly parried in the pitch blackness by a dreamlike stroke of D's blade right out of the sheath.

"Not bad," an almost-mechanical voice told the Hunter. "But you're looking at a man who fought a god. I won't be defeated by anything as weak as a human being. The god lost its blood, its sight, and one of its arms in this fog. The three of us were selected from the Sacred Ancestor's army for this very day."

As D listened to his foe's determined words, the blood was flowing out of his body. If anyone had been there to see him, D would've looked like a blob of red in the shape of a person. He fell to one knee, and then used his sword to stand again.

From up ahead of him . . . no, from behind him . . . then from his right or his left, his foe asked, "Can you see me?"

Something surged toward D without a sound.

Just then, the Hunter replied, "I see you."

It wasn't clear if his opponent actually caught that voice, like a withered bole that could chill the rest of the forest, but a cry of pain that echoed with something strange and inhuman flowed down to the floor, sliding along for several yards before it was silenced.

D spun around. Poised for action against the presence he'd sensed behind him, he still had both eyes shut tight.

“It’s me, Bierce,” the voice called out to him in a pained tone. “Weizmann’s been changed by the god thing. He made off with Maria, Toto, and the old lady. Sorry, he caught me with a shot while I was off guard. I’m guessing they’re hostages.”

“There’s another possibility,” D said, giving his blade a shake. Blood spattered across the floor. Usually, not so much as a drop of gore clung to his sword. This time, his blood loss had left him so weakened it’d affected his swordplay.

“What’s that?” Bierce inquired. His face was barely discernible. The demonic fog was leaving.

“They’re a sacrifice.”

The warrior was speechless.

“The god still can’t move. The one hand it finally managed to free was cut off. In order to resume its reign as a god, it’ll need life. Did they head up?”

“I think so.”

“Talk about useless.”

Out of reflex, Bierce angrily thought, *What?* before reconsidering. *The voice isn’t the same*, he told himself, but by that time D was already unsteadily heading toward the stairs. The shadow that fell at his feet was painted in bright blood.

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“Above us is the roof,” the transport officer said, looking up toward the heavens as he cleared the last step. His right hand gripped Maria’s, his left, Toto’s, and on his back he carried Mrs. Stow.

“So, this great god of yours is waiting up there, is it? What’s it going to do to us?” Maria said, glaring at Weizmann.

“Ask the god that.”

“Well, looks like you got to do your job after all. Right now, you’re transporting us.”

“You think so? At any rate, I sure showed up those other two guys.”

“Oh, is that why you let Mr. Stow—” Maria started to say, but on noticing the old woman, she continued, “—why you let that god thing make you its slave?”

“Why else?”

Maria used her free hand to wipe her face, saying, “You were in such a miserable state, you were willing to let the Nobility make a pet out of you.”

“That doesn’t bother me. I’m from a distinguished family up north. Didn’t you recognize the Weizmann name?”

“Not really.”

Realizing that she was trying to antagonize him, Weizmann grinned savagely. His exposed fangs gave Maria chills.

“My family’s produced judges and lawyers for generations. My grandfather was on the Supreme Court of the Frontier, and my father was the chair of the Grand Jury. He was succeeded by my oldest brother. The next oldest became a lawyer and started a practice in the Capital.”

“Weizmann the lawyer—I’ve heard of him. That’s your brother? Why didn’t *you* ever amount to anything?”

“Do your worst. There’s nothing you could say to me now that I haven’t already heard from the people around me. They like to say the youngest Weizmann’s a screwup, or talk about how he ended up an officer transferring prisoners, of all things. My father disowned me ages ago.”

“I can imagine.”

“But no one’s going to talk to me like that anymore. Once I’ve left the fortress, I’m going to the Capital. After I’ve shown my father and brothers what I’ve become, I’ll rip their heads off. A godlike being is entitled to do things like that.”

“Yeah, godlike,” Maria said, staring intently at the face of the spoiled brat turned madman. “In that case, whatever’s up on the roof can’t be any kind of god. Who’d ever give any power to a kid like you, all screwed up with weird ideas about your own pride? You remember back on the raft, when you used that gun of yours to save us all? I thought you were the best then.”

Turbulence shot across Weizmann’s face.

“Don’t speak to me of the time when I was merely human. Besides, didn’t the rest of you listen to those whispers from the suckling and Mr. Stow?”

All three of them—including Mrs. Stow on Weizmann’s back—looked at each other.

“Are you playing dumb, or have you not yet noticed your power? I didn’t realize it until a short time ago. Well, it doesn’t matter—let’s go.”

“You know, this kid tried to save us all. I don’t know whether or not you’re a godlike being, but aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

“She’s right,” Mrs. Stow said from Weizmann’s back. “Even if a human being doesn’t care, anything that calls itself a god should know what’s truly important. Kindly set me down. I’ll walk on my own.”

And saying this, the old woman jumped down—both Weizmann’s hands were occupied—and coughed.

Maria tried to shake free of the man’s hand, but she had little success.

It was almost painful to watch the old woman’s movements as she got to her feet and said, “Goodbye, Maria. I’ll choose for myself where I meet my end. Take care.”

And with that, she walked back the way they’d come. There was no place for her to meet her end here. Nevertheless, the old woman stood tall, her gait infused with power.

Maria was free now. Weizmann had let go of her hand. She was about to run toward the old woman, but then she stopped herself.

It had come to her in a flash. Turning, Maria prepared to pounce, but Weizmann already had the barrel of his motor gun pointed at the old woman’s back.

“Stop!”

Maria’s scream seemed to change the killer’s mind. Using centrifugal force to send Toto flying, Weizmann spun around and pulled the trigger on a figure that stood facing him some thirty feet down the hall.

As bullets slammed into him a hundred times a second, the boy in a turban and

toga smiled back innocently, saying, “Let’s play.”

Weizmann opened his mouth. The pair of fangs was painfully conspicuous in his fiery red maw. But just as he was about to kick off the ground, his legs were torn free at the pelvis—that was the only way to describe the way they came off.

Walking over to the “godlike being” who unleashed a beastly howl, the boy took the legs he’d ripped from the doll and threw them in Weizmann’s face.

“Can we play some more?” the boy asked, his eyes reflecting the image of Maria and Toto.

The boy raised his doll high. Apparently it was fashioned from clay, and though the doll’s face had been that of Weizmann, it transformed in the blink of an eye to Toto’s.

“You see, this is how I tore off the god’s arm,” the boy said proudly, reaching for the neck of his doll of Toto.

A vision of what would occur next filling her brain, Maria shut her eyes.

There was a pop like a paper bag exploding, betraying the woman’s expectations.

The boy wasn’t there. Where he’d been, there was a great serpent of a tentacle that reminded her of tanned black leather, curled into a ball. Beneath the ball, a pair of legs could be seen. Blood immediately began to drip from them.

“My god, how good of you to rescue your poor—” Weizmann began to groan from his spot on the floor, sounding close to tears, but a heartbeat later the tentacle balled around him.

There was the sound of bones snapping.

Thinking she could hear the transport officer screaming, Maria covered her ears. It sounded like he’d said, “My god, why have you done this to me?”

The tentacle was drawing closer. Hugging Toto, Maria shut her eyes. Something soft wrapped around her torso—or so it seemed, and then a breeze struck her cheek. The bonds on her torso had disappeared.

When Maria opened her eyes again, she was on the roof. To either side of her

lay rows of golden tanks and radar domes for interplanetary communication, but what caught her eye was the huge pile of tentacles that occupied two-thirds of the rooftop. The thing had lost one arm, and if the tentacle that brought her and Toto there was the other one, it had to be impossibly long. Though she strained her eyes to try to see its body, she saw nothing aside from the mountainous coils.

"Oh . . . Maria," she heard Mrs. Stow say behind her. Apparently the tentacles hadn't let the old woman escape.

"I'm fine. Where's the exit?"

"Right behind us. We can't be ten paces from it."

Though Mrs. Stow's voice was shaky, her grasp of their situation was firm enough. The old woman rose even higher in Maria's estimation.

"Well, when I say the word, I want you to run for it. Okay?"

"Okay."

Maria considered the timing. While the mass of tentacles writhed perversely, she couldn't find its head.

At any rate, I guess we should try to get away, she thought. She found it strange that looking at something so disturbing hadn't left her immobilized.

"I'll count to three. One . . ."

She put her strength into her legs.

"Two . . ."

Now.

"Three!" Maria said as she turned around.

Something pulled hard at the boy in her arms. With a tortured cry from Maria, he was down on the floor, still squeezing the fingers of her left hand.

"Make a run for it!" she shouted.

"We can't do that."

Having chilled the blood of Maria and Mrs. Stow—who'd halted—the boy

slowly smiled, revealing the fangs he'd kept concealed until then.

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IV

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"Toto—not you too . . ."

It was all Maria could do to squeeze those words out. Her very blood was frozen.

"Don't look at me like that," Toto said, his tone just as timid and gentle as it'd been before. That was probably the only thing that kept Maria from fainting dead away. "I'm not going to just offer up the two of you. I'll go there with you."

"Let go of my hand. That might be fine with you, but I want no part of it. Now, I have to take Mrs. Stow and get out of here. Don't try to stop us."

The boy crinkled his little brow, saying, "It's funny. Didn't you hear those two whispering to you?"

"Yes, I did, truth be told."

"Then why didn't you accept their offers?"

"Fat chance of that happening. All that talk about how unlucky I was to have my own family turn on me and sell me to traveling gypsies was a lot of hot air. See, you can't live your life if you let every little thing like that get under your skin. When they were getting rid of me, I bit one of my parents' fingers off, and anyone who ever bullied me—I don't care if it was a man or a woman, one of my superiors, or someone rich—they all got it back in spades. I'm not gonna say it didn't hurt me, but I've lived as I like and I've got no regrets about it. And thanks to that, I don't hate anyone. I'd be damned if I'd take them up on a pitiful offer like that. But then, I can't speak for anyone else."

"I envy you, miss," Toto said.

"If that's the way you feel, let us go. Or you could come with us instead. That'd

be nice, wouldn't it?"

As the boy stared at Maria, his eyes filled with a glow that was terribly calm. It was the same glow Maria had carried in her heart until just now.

Maria felt the boy's fingers release her.

"Don't be stupid—come with us!" the woman said, but as she reached out for Toto, he drifted away without moving his legs.

"Child," Mrs. Stow said, extending both hands.

A thin smile rose to Toto's lips. Though he still had fangs, his grin was that of a human.

A black mass burst through his chest from behind.

"*Toto!*"

"My dear child!"

With the cries of the two women as his only parting gift, the boy was lifted by something that seemed too enormous to be called a tentacle and hurled into the distance with incredible force. Leaving only a streak of blue blood through space, the boy vanished into the watery light. He would fly many miles before he fell back to earth.

"I can't believe you, doing that to a nice kid like that!" Maria said, wiping her tears away.

The tentacle loomed before her. It was more than a colossal pillar; it called to mind a tower. Though she thought about simply standing there and glaring at it until it impaled her as it had Toto, there was still someone she wanted to save.

"Back away slowly," Maria whispered to the old woman behind her.

"Okay."

"We're gonna run for it, okay?"

"Yes."

"Now!"

Maria turned around. There was no exit before her. A wall-like tentacle barred

the way.

No, we're finished! she thought, despair sinking its teeth into her heart.

Come, said the same voice she'd heard down below.

"Sorry, Mrs. Stow—this is the end of the line."

"Please, don't apologize. You really did great."

"Mind if I ask you something?"

"What might that be?"

"Didn't they make you an offer, ma'am?"

Mrs. Stow laughed easily.

"Oh, yes, my husband was most persistent. But I don't hate anyone, either."

"Looks like that saved us both, eh?"

"Isn't that the truth."

The two women hugged each other.

Maria glared at the tentacle. Suddenly, it twitched violently, and then disappeared. Behind it, the exit became visible. From that exit, a pair of figures were now approaching them, one armed with a longsword and the other with crimson arrows of iron. The young man in the lead should've been dressed in black, but he was now stained vermilion.

"D!"

"They're all yours," D told Bierce tersely, walking by the women without another word.

So good of you to come, O powerful one, the god said, its voice raining down on the Hunter. *I won't do anything to you. I wish to see whether or not you're just like* him.

D's body sailed through the air. Bounding just once off the tentacle, he rose up to the pinnacle of that black mountain and out of Maria's sight. But just before he disappeared, Maria saw that he had his longsword raised high.

What occurred then was very strange.

The next second, Maria was standing on a desolate plain. In front of her stood D, poised with his blade driven into the ground. Turning, the woman saw Mrs. Stow and Bierce about ten feet behind her. She suddenly noticed something—the sun was high in the sky. From its position, it must've been nearly midday.

D walked over to her. Before Maria could say anything, the Hunter told her, "Looks like it kept its promise."

"What?"

"It transported us here. The highway runs right through this area. A bus should be along soon."

Far behind D, a strip of white ran without end across the reddish-brown earth.

"What about that god thing?"

"It disappeared."

While that was true enough, the Hunter's reply was far from amiable.

"Funny, the sky is kind of—"

"That the god's doing?" Bierce asked D.

The handsome Hunter nodded his head.

"Its death throes sped up the planet's rotation."

Maria couldn't speak. Finally, she managed to ask, "It looks like we were saved, thanks to you—but what are *you* doing out here?"

There was no reply.

Guess I should've known, the woman thought to herself.

"Did the old man make you an offer?" D asked Maria.

"Yeah, just once. I prettied the story up for Toto, but to be honest, if he'd asked me over and over, I'd have probably taken him up on it. Come to think of it, I wonder why he wasn't more insistent."

Holding his fist out under her nose, D opened his fingers. He held a gold pendant.

"A keepsake from the suckling."

His hand tilted to one side, and as the woman frantically caught the glittering treasure he dropped, she asked, “Why give it to me?”

“The girl he was going to give it to was named Maria.”

The woman didn’t know what to say.

“Did the suckling make you an offer?”

Maria shook her head. What was D trying to say? Did he know something?

However, Maria quickly abandoned this train of thought. Whatever was done, was done. There was still a mountain of things she had to do.

“Speaking of that, D,” Bierce said to the Hunter. The next words from his mouth were astounding: “I was made an offer, too.”

Maria and Mrs. Stow backed away. Both were pale.

“I was asked if I’d like to be even stronger than I’d been in my prime. I’m almost embarrassed to admit it. Go ahead and laugh. But since I’ve been given this opportunity, there is something I wanna try. Namely, I’d like to test myself against Vampire Hunter D. Will you indulge me?”

D’s right hand went for the hilt of his sword.

“I appreciate it. I’m gonna pull out all the stops.”

Lowering his hips, Bierce poised himself to throw, each of his hands already gripping iron arrows in anticipation of the deadly moment of truth.

Fifteen feet lay between them.

As an overwhelming will to kill coalesced, Maria and Mrs. Stow could be heard calling out, “A bus!”

D kicked off the ground. He raced toward his opponent like a gust of wind. In stark opposition to the light of day, he was a remnant of the exquisite darkness.

Iron arrows flew to greet him. Not even bothering to bat them down, D pounced.

At the zenith of his arc over the crimson streaks, D lurched. An arrow had pierced his left shoulder. Even D couldn’t dodge that arrow, which had been launched by the warrior’s god-given power.

As soon as the Hunter touched back to earth, another arrow flew.

Deflecting it, D hurled his sword like a throwing knife at the same moment. It pierced Bierce's heart as he was poised to throw again, deciding their duel.

"So, that's the road that kid is on? D, I think I . . . got it easier."

Spitting a clot of blue blood from his mouth, the warrior slumped forward. Reddish-brown dust went up, covering his body.

"He gave me some help, didn't he?" D said once the dust had settled.

Maria nodded, thinking about Toto slowly decaying somewhere.

Just as Bierce had been about to release another volley of arrows with the power the god had given him, all four of them had experienced a shuddering terror. That was the thing little Toto kept hidden in his psyche. The fear he'd felt as an infant when his father had tried to get rid of him, the horror he'd felt as a child being beaten and unwanted. Maria and Mrs. Stow had fainted where they stood, while Bierce had been terrified. Only D had weathered it. And that had meant the difference between life and death.

A horn honked. The bus that stopped by the side of the road was calling them.

"D!" Maria called out. "I'm gonna look for that kid. I'm sure I'll find him before my days are up."

"I think he'd like that," D said, quietly returning his blade to its sheath.

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Two days later.

Three passengers got off at a long-distance bus terminal in the eastern Frontier. One was a young man so gorgeous people waiting for the bus nearly fainted, while the other two were a young woman and a distinguished older lady. The first two headed into the marketplace across from the terminal, while the old woman went over to wait for a different bus.

As a traveler who was waiting for the same bus a short distance away looked on, an old man appeared out of nowhere and wrapped his arms around her from behind.

Though it didn’t reach the traveler’s ears, their conversation was as follows:

“I came to collect you, honey,” the old man whispered into her ear.

“Ah, but there isn’t any place in particular I want to go,” the old woman said, looking rather beleaguered. “I really had hoped to keep traveling with those two.”

“Liar. You took me up on my offer, didn’t you? Now, let’s go punish our ingrate sons.”

“Unlike you, I don’t hate our children. Actually, I don’t hate anyone.” And then she added quite clearly, “Except for you, that is.”

And as her husband turned, Mrs. Stow took the dagger D had given her for self-defense and plunged it into his chest.

The old man’s eyes opened wide. Fangs spilled from the corners of his mouth—along with blue blood.

“So, that’s it . . . It was me . . . that you hated?”

“Yes, it was. You gave me cause enough, didn’t you? You might not remember, but I certainly could never forget. Not to worry, though. You won’t be going alone.”

“Really? I appreciate that.”

And saying this, the old man disappeared.

The traveler saw the old woman’s back quaking. Perhaps she was crying. Before long, she turned around and, on noticing the traveler, bowed before turning again and staring off at the marketplace. After doing that for quite some time, she took the dagger she’d been holding all along and drove it into her own chest.

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END

POSTSCRIPT

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On rereading this book, I thought to myself, “This is *Grand Hotel*!” That film spawned a whole genre of movies where individuals from all walks of life assemble in a single place. Jan, Maria, the Stows, Bierce, Weizmann—all of these people are forced to examine their lives as they travel with D.

At first, I thought of making this story simply about D. Questions about destiny or the pursuit of his humanity could wait until later. A sense of speed and intense action were going to be my first priority. But as the book came together, that’s not how it played out.

Even if she hasn’t turned into a Noble, someone who’s been drained of blood is shunned by her fellow humans. Abandoned by parents and siblings or sometimes even marked for death by them, these individuals have an air of isolation. And then there are the fathomless depths of the pointlessness and grief of the Nobility—vampires who realize their mighty race is sliding toward destruction, yet still behave as if they were the rulers. As this is a novel rather than a comic or a movie, I just couldn’t pass up those emotions. Call them the theme, if you will. Needless to say, I could’ve just gone ahead with a straight action tale like I’d first intended. I guess you could say I was feeling righteous. (*laughs*) But I chose the latter.

So while this evil god is being exterminated, the flavor of human drama among the characters is particularly strong. However, it’s difficult to weave that together with D’s actions. While he goes about his work as usual, the people around him are forced to reflect on their lives to the point where it pains them, and then they either overcome that pain or are destroyed by it. And when that happens, D must perform his duty whether he likes it or not, like a doctor. However, this physician doesn’t offer comprehensive treatment. He doesn’t even inquire as to what’s bothering his patients. Quietly he discharges his duty, leaving his charges to find their own road to recovery.

Such is D’s story.

-

Hideyuki Kikuchi June 13, 2011

while watching Let Me In

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 19

Mercenary Road

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in Spring 2013
from Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

FOUR OUTLAWS

CHAPTER 1

I

If ever there was a peaceful day on the Frontier, today was such a day. There were none of the winds from the north that carried airborne monsters and evil spirits, so a drunk with a bottle of cheap liquor in hand could walk from one end of Main Street to the other without breaking a sweat. Children were out on the school field engrossed in a rather rough new game that was said to be all the rage in the Capital. The sheriff, having finished his patrol about ten minutes earlier, was completing his reports on a couple of recent crimes, while the owner of the general store sat in the corner of his currently customer-free shop eagerly envisioning the fire-lizard races that would soon be held in the neighboring village. On a day like this, it seemed that even a lone flesh-eating rat crossing the street would've been enough to throw the entire town into a tumult.

Four cyborg horses halted in front of the Bossage Bank, and the riders dismounted, climbed the stairs, and disappeared through the doors. Their movements seemed well considered and rehearsed.

The account of the late security guard Chad Mostow (as recounted by his medium-summoned ghost):

It was right about noon, and I was musing over whether me or my partner Gazelle Hugo would break for lunch first. I was pretty distracted, so when they came in, it was Gazelle that noticed 'em first. They just plugged me right between the eyes so I didn't see anything, but now I know what happened.

As they came through the doors, they leveled their guns and opened up on me and Gazelle. All four of 'em had ladies' stockings over their heads. I was hit by a shot from the repeating rifle a washed-up warrior named Zack Morrowbak carried, while Gazelle got it from a shotgun packed by another former warrior,

who goes by the name of Scuda Corkly. I was taken out with just one shot, but even after taking a shotgun blast to the left side of his body, Gazelle returned fire on Scuda with his rifle, wrecking the outlaw's right arm below the elbow before a third fella, Yuri Tataika, hit him with a shot from his crossbow. Now, since that bow had a fifty-horsepower motor drawing its string, it put an iron arrow right through Gazelle's heart, killing him instantly. He's right beside me now. And next to him is the six-year-old boy who caught the arrow that went through Gazelle in the neck—Peter, the baker's son.

After the four outlaws had taken us out, Zack and Scuda covered the customers while Yuri and the other one jumped the counter and slipped into the office, where the other one took his longsword and cut down the head cashier, Tomak Len—who'd just turned all of twenty—and ordered bank manager Tom Nolan to open the safe. It was only natural that the manager hesitated. He figured the sound of gunfire would have the town's vigilance committee and the sheriff's department running there on the double.

And the outlaws must've known that, too. All of a sudden, the fourth one cut the heads off two tellers, Medelle Hisar and Matthew Nebresco. Both with the same swipe—that's the kind of thing only a Noble or a dhampir could manage with a sword. The manager turned real pale and did like they said, then they grabbed the bags of money before taking the heads off Nolan and the rest of his staff—Matoya Pereslo and Jessica Nielsen. Now the lady teller, Jessica, she was a good ten feet from those other two, but again, they were all killed with the same stroke. Even though the fourth outlaw's blade couldn't have been more than three feet long.

While all that was happening, the two in the lobby tied up the bus driver Concho Hardley, housewives Beatrice Lachauer and Sara Schon, and Peter's mother Katie Dolsenen, but as soon as Yuri and the other one came back with the bags of money, they gunned them all down in cold blood and cleared out.

I don't know the fourth one's name or anything about him. But even in my present state, he scares me. That fourth outlaw is possessed by something. And even though I've passed over to the other side, I still can't begin to imagine what it is—but until you find out for sure what's in him and destroy it, not even the best warrior will be able to slay him.

Oh, I feel cold all of a sudden . . . Ah, so that's what it is. The thing that's possessing him knows that I'm testifying. Oh, no . . . it's found me! That's it for me. This is the end.

Stay away! Don't come near me! Ahhhhhhh!

Click!

Taking his finger from the button of an old-fashioned tape player, an old man with a gray beard to match his gray head of hair looked over the two people who'd joined him. This was a rather wealthy town where crops and livestock were traded, and considerable funds had been put into this lavish room, making it seem far from what one would expect to find in a simple Frontier town hall. The ceiling, walls, and floor were all literally covered by what could only be described as a gaudy collection of portraits and miniature paintings, and while this room had surely cost a great deal of money, when trying to hold a meeting or conference there it was difficult to relax for even a second, which left all the participants deathly tired.

However, both the woman who was seated about six feet from the gray-haired old man and the man leaning back against the far wall seemed relaxed and totally unaffected by the spell of the room. Like the man against the wall, the woman in the chair wore armor crafted from the soft but resilient scales of the fire dragon—an item that made it clear at a glance that one was a warrior—and over her left shoulder she had a sword of ordinary length. More than its strength, the selling point of this armor was the way the scales were attached to allow freedom of movement. She had the kind of beauty that would leave not only men but even other women staring in awe, but a long, deep scar ran down her right cheek, lending her lovely features a fierce intensity. The woman's form was free of earrings, necklaces, rings, or any other trinkets, and the only ornamentation on her armor, gloves, and leg protectors was cuts and scorch marks.

The man, by comparison, wore a navy-blue cape over a wine-red vest lavishly embroidered with silver and gold thread, and he had gold slacks on. In addition to a gold-handled dagger and some throwing knives, the heavily detailed combat

belt around his waist also held a pair of bejeweled revolvers that looked more like works of art than practical weapons.

That wasn't to say he had lousy taste: it was the sort of style any warrior on the Frontier might wear to get people's notice. Wearing this kind of outfit to get work was rather dignified compared to the warriors who put on a real act, going down the main street every time they came into a new town, gunning birds and flying beasties out of the sky with a pair of pistols, finding the town or village lowlife so they could pick a fight with him and kill him, then waiting for a big job to land in their lap—usually acting as a bodyguard or killing someone.

You had to sell your skill at fighting—that's all a warrior knew how to do, and your life could be heaven or hell depending on whether or not you caught the eye of the locals who called the shots. What warriors earned depended on their abilities and the strength and number of their opponents, but on average they were said to bring in about fifty dalas a day. Out on the Frontier, where one dala would buy a family of four a full-course dinner—with thunder beast or three-headed stag as the main dish—that was very good compensation, but it seemed fair for someone who was risking his life. Still, if he were to take part in something big—such as hunting down Nobility or taking on an immortal opponent—a warrior might be promised compensation on the order of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dalas, and that would serve him well in his life after retirement. It was little wonder that he might let his appearance become ostentatious, or his words and deeds exaggerated and overly theatrical.

"After that, the outlaws fought their way through some townsfolk and escaped to where we'd like to send you—the Florence Highway, also known as Mercenary Road. That's why I played that tape of the ghost's testimony for you, even though that incident has nothing to do with this. It couldn't hurt you to know that the mercenaries might not be your only foes out there."

"That is good to know," the warrior against the wall said, nodding. As befitted his face, his voice sounded like iron on steel.

The old man looked at the female warrior as if to ask, *And how about you?*

Though she looked like a hothouse blossom, her voice was exactly the opposite as she said, "That fourth one—I wonder who he is."

Her icy voice made the old man recoil, while the man against the wall donned a surprised expression. This was the first time the two warriors had heard each other speak.

“I don’t know. They’re supposed to be able to see everything from the land of the dead, but that ghost was still a wreck. More than the man himself, it’s whatever’s possessing that outlaw you have to watch out for. It’s not unusual for some evil spirits to give a person unnatural strength when they possess him. But I’m sure the two of you will manage something.”

“I wonder if it’ll go as smoothly as all that, Mr. Mayor.”

The eyes of the old man and the lovely woman focused on the younger man’s sun-bronzed face.

“What do you mean by that, Mr. Strider?”

“I’ve got a real nose for these things. For a second there, I sensed something. About what that fourth one is, I mean.”

“Bless my heart,” the female warrior remarked, surprise sneaking into her hitherto-neutral expression.

While female warriors weren’t uncommon on the Frontier, for the most part they made a conscious effort to speak and act just like men. Those who didn’t hide their femininity, like this woman, were a rare breed.

“In that case, you must know something about his nature. Would you be so kind as to share it with us?”

“Regretfully, I must decline. After all, it’s just a hunch. The feeling I got, though—it was almost like he was a dead man. But he’s alive.”

“That’s a strange way of putting it,” the woman said coolly but bemusedly. “Do you know anything else about him?”

“Not a thing. And I don’t want to, either. I just pray I don’t run into him.”

“You still intend on going?” the woman asked, staring at the man called Strider. “If you bailed out of this job, it’d mean more money for me.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing,” Strider confessed, smiling all the while. “My hunch is this won’t be any place for a woman. I don’t mean to tell you your

business, but you should walk away.”

“Instead of this line of work, have you ever considered doing stage shows out in the boondocks?”

“What?”

“Well, I’m blinded by that wonderful costume of yours. It must be even harder to be the one wearing it. When the time comes, it might leave you too dizzy to fight.”

The mayor grinned wryly.

Tension filled the room.

II

“You’re one to talk, you third-rate warrior, leaving your back open like that! Please, honor me with some more of your great wisdom,” the man replied, hostility radiating from every inch of him.

Keeping your back covered was the first step in keeping someone from surprising you with an attack from behind.

The woman said frostily, “Having your back to the wall is all well and good, but what do you intend to do if you have to meet with an employer in a hall that seats ten thousand? Shout back and forth at each other for the entire exchange? By the time your meeting’s done, you’ll both be hoarse.”

The man pulled away from the wall. There was a faint sound from the longsword on his back—it was nearly six feet in length. Though it seemed a bit long for someone his height, it made it clear that guns weren’t his only weapons.

“We can’t have you fighting at a time like this, Mr. Strider and Ms. Stanza. After all, we haven’t had many applicants for this rescue mission,” the mayor said with displeasure in an attempt to stop them.

The man—Strider—went back to the wall. That was what a professional would do. Only an amateur got so hot under the collar he'd throw away a chance to make some money.

"Couldn't you tell us what this gig entails, already? The deadline for applications is dawn tomorrow; am I right?"

At Strider's sneers, the mayor shrugged his shoulders.

"Two days have passed since you started forming this rescue team. Any real daredevil warriors would be here by now. Give up already. Time's a-wasting."

Looking up, the female warrior, Stanza, said, "Pardon me for saying so, Mr. Mayor, but the listing reads: *Job: rescue, extremely dangerous. Compensation: ample.* You're not going to get many takers with that. Besides, there's a gang war going on in Cactus, and pretty much anyone who thinks they're any good has headed there to cash in on it."

"Then you mean to tell me you two don't think you're any good?" the mayor said, a bitter grin on his face.

"I want to know what the situation is," Stanza said, pressing for more information. "Do what you will, but people still see things and talk. Strange characters have shown up all over Mercenary Road, and they're attacking farms and ranches—that much I've heard myself."

"And troops from Cactus raced off to help, but were never heard from again," said Strider.

As a native of the Frontier, the mayor had apparently expected this, and he showed no surprise at all as he said, "It was exactly five days ago we got word from the Slocum place along the highway. Two days after that, a hundred armed soldiers raced west along the highway from Cactus, and not a word's been heard from them since. It would seem they were taken out before they could even get a messenger hound off. That's why the authorities in Cactus haven't been able to put down the gang violence. We waited another day after that before taking applications. There's a carriage and driver standing by. I want you to set out tonight."

"But what's the situation?" Stanza inquired.

“According to an emergency carrier pigeon from Slocum’s house, what appear to be armored troops are massing on the highway, attacking each and every home they come to. Their family intended to flee to the ruins—that was all they could tell us.”

“When you say *ruins* on Mercenary Road—you mean *that place*?” Stanza asked, a terrible gleam in her eye.

Strider whistled.

Both of them were surprised—and afraid.

“And communication after that?”

“None whatsoever. To be honest, we don’t know if there are any survivors or not. So, it might be a complete waste sending you folks out there. Nevertheless, we’re willing to pay. Fifty thousand dalas apiece.”

Whistling again, Strider remarked, “Well, that’s most generous.”

“Double it.”

The mayor stared at Stanza. This time, he was practically glaring at her as he said, “Pardon me, but that’s well above the going rate.”

“Not for dealing with something like this. The mercenaries who appear from time to time on the Florence Highway are evil beings created by the Nobility and even feared by the same. It’d be hard enough to sneak by them and make it to the ruins, but then we’d have to make it back again. And I’ve only got one life to lose.”

“There’s no proof that these attackers are the same mercenaries,” the mayor protested in a beastly growl. “They’re just a legend, and died out long ago—some five millennia ago. You think they’d come back after all this time?”

“You do know the Nobles’ lives are eternal, don’t you? It wouldn’t be all that strange for them to breathe new life into these creations of theirs. At any rate, I expect to be paid a hundred thousand dalas. If you don’t like that, I guess I’m done here.”

Shifting the longsword she held to her left hand, Stanza got to her feet.

“I won’t work for peanuts, either,” Strider said, stepping away from the wall.

“W—wait! Just hold on,” the mayor stammered, hurriedly trying to stop them. Beneath a receding hairline, his brow glistened with sweat. “Innocent people are in need of your aid. As a human being, don’t you want to help them?”

“A human being?” Stanza said, a thin smile chiseling itself onto her lips—a smile made of ice. “I used to be one of those, I suppose.”

“I’m with you. See you around, Mr. Mayor.”

“W—wait!”

“Are you gonna pay the hundred thousand?” Strider asked, leaning forward.

“I’ll have to consult our accountants. Digging a tunnel through the mountain chain to our west has left the town strapped for cash.”

“Then you’ll just have to sit back and live within your means, I guess,” Stanza said, turning toward the door.

“That’ll never do. Maintaining and safeguarding the highway is part of our town’s mandate.”

“That means you get special subsidies from the Capital, doesn’t it?”

The mayor gave the smirking Strider a look like he was calling him a third-rate swordsman.

“Ten million dalas a year, as I recall—and you wouldn’t wanna blow that, would you? Just pay out the hundred thousand dalas.”

As Stanza headed for the door, she said, “Talk to your bean counters. I’ll be at the hotel or in a bar.”

“Same goes for me,” said Strider.

After the two of them had left, the mayor said, “This was supposed to be a mission of mercy we were organizing. Money-grubbing bastards!”

Finally able to release his rage, he stomped his feet in anger.

Though the town’s finances might’ve been strained, things were hopping in the Silver Castle Saloon and everywhere else in

the entertainment district. This particular establishment operated three separate businesses: a bar, a casino, and a whorehouse.

The scent of alcohol, drugs, and nicotine hung in the saloon like an iridescent haze, the coquettish voices of women jostled with the angry tones of men, and when the door to a gambling parlor that echoed with the sounds of roulette and cards and the cries of beasts opened, a bouncer hurried toward the exit with a bloodied patron who'd apparently lost his temper after a streak of losses, while a traveler or speculator who seemed to have won big climbed the stairs, accompanied by a bevy of women. Exchanges of gunfire rang out from time to time, but they soon died away, swallowed by the eddying mire of lust.

In one corner of the gambling parlor, a terrible cry of pain went up. An enormous figure that was green from head to toe had just clapped a bear hug on an indigo individual every bit as large as himself. Green muscles swelled like balloons filling with water. The sound of snapping bone rang out, but it immediately drowned in the sea of cheers that went up. Stark bone jutted conspicuously from the indigo body that fell to the floor.

"And green is the winner! Step that way to claim your winnings," the referee of the cruel spectacle that was "monster dueling" called out in a loud voice, pointing to the cashier in the back. Naturally, he was an employee of the Silver Castle.

Covering about seventeen hundred square feet, which was about a third of the staggeringly large gambling parlor, this game actually took place in a cage fifteen feet tall and fifty feet in diameter. The cage was electrified, and it set off a fierce shower of sparks every time it was touched by one of the modified beasts—captured fire dragons, rock demons, or heavily altered bio-men. Both the house and the customers made these modifications and trained their monsters to fight in order to collect bets. With greater financial resources to draw on, the saloon usually fielded the winning altered beast, though recently some patrons had banded together into project teams that invested a fair sum of money into the monsters they entered, meaning the saloon couldn't rest on its laurels.

"Hey, there!"

Stanza didn't even turn when she was slapped on the shoulder.

In the cage about six feet in front of her, saloon staff armed with electrified whips were driving the green bio-man to one side of the cage while the dying bio-man was carried out.

“Aren’t you the little ice queen. You mind?” the resplendent warrior Strider asked, grinning all the while.

She hadn’t been kidding when she said she’d be at the hotel or in a bar.

“Suit yourself,” Stanza replied, not because she cared for him, but because it really didn’t matter either way.

For all his complaints about warriors leaving their backs open, Strider was only too happy to leave his back exposed to the other patrons now. After ordering an absinthe from an ass-wiggling waitress connected to the whorehouse, he looked at Stanza’s glass and commented, “You’re drinking the same? You’re a tough one.”

He couldn’t have been any more pretentious in his compliment.

The absinthe served out on the Frontier wasn’t the real stuff like they had in the Capital. Intended for humans who’d been modified for heavy manual labor, the synthesized drink was five times stronger than the original. A flame would not only ignite it—it’d make the stuff explode, and one glass was enough to cause immediate alcohol poisoning and possibly death in the average person. No one in their right mind ordered it, but then, warriors were some kind of monster.

“Anyway, earlier, you had no problem turning your back to me. What’s the story with that?”

“For the same reason you’re doing it now.”

“You mean because anyone who can’t tell when someone’s creeping up on him can’t really be called a pro? When you pull that, it kinda undermines my bluff, you know.”

“Sorry.”

Stanza’s insincere reply was buried beneath vicious cries and screams. One of the employees bolted from the cage clutching his shoulder, while a few others raced over and shut the door. The cage shook. The bio-man had slammed up

against it. Disproportionately long and thick fingers wrapped around the iron bars and began to rattle them violently. Patrons screamed, and some of the women even got to their feet.

“The big guy’s pretty pissed, eh?”

“They must’ve shot him full of drugs to keep him riled up.”

“You can say that again,” Strider agreed, taking the blue glass that’d just been brought to him and draining it in one gulp.

A pale arm wrapped around his neck like a snake. It belonged to a waitress with bare shoulders and a lot of thigh showing.

“Hey, how about you buy me one, too?”

Grinning at her cloying tone, Strider pointed to his empty glass and said, “You want some of that?”

“Yeah. Passed to me mouth to mouth.”

“I see. You say the damnedest things, don’t you? I like you, missy.”

“Same here—this might be L-O-V-E,” she replied, a delicate finger prodding Strider’s cheek.

“But this drink’s not really the thing for you,” Strider said, making a wry face.

“Oh, why not?”

The woman’s right hand began to inch across Strider’s chest. Bringing lips smeared with bright red lipstick to Strider’s ear, she whispered, “The woman next to you—she scares me.”

III

“It’s that obvious, is it?”

“Just now, when I walked behind her, I got chills.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Nodding and grinning, the warrior stared at Stanza's profile and said, "We got some interesting guests here."

The two warriors were seated in the foremost row of seats on the north side of the rocking cage. Stanza's unblinking gaze was focused on a spot on the east side. Finding her complete lack of movement somewhat unsettling, Strider followed her eyes but found nothing save ordinary hick customers. But in his ear, he heard the female warrior say in a tense tone, "That guy."

Her tone of voice made the waitress clinging to Strider gasp aloud.

Stanza stood up. The three copper coins worth ten druids each that she dropped on the table scattered noisily.

"Hey!" Strider called out to her, but her lithe form weaved through the patrons as she headed for the door.

"This should be interesting. Well, I'll be going too," the warrior said.

Clinging to Strider as he tried to get up, the woman told him, "No, you can't go."

"I have to. You'll just have to settle for this little magic trick I'll show you."

"Huh?" the woman said, knitting the brow of what was actually a rather mean visage.

A gout of flames whooshed out in front of her, and she shrieked and leaned back as the flames licked at her heavily made-up face. Screams of a kind rarely heard even in an establishment frequented by misfits and scoundrels rang out, and the other patrons turned all at once in her direction.

"Pardon me!"

"Hey, get outta my way!"

The saloon staff who weaved and shoved their way through the patrons had already gone pale.

The woman writhed on the floor, the outer layer of skin peeling off her face, and the same man who gave the orders to pick her up and bring her into the back room said to the warrior, "Sir, don't you think you took your joke a little too far?"

The eyes that glared at Strider already swirled with a malice that would not be contained. In addition to the two who took the woman away, there were five more men behind him—all tough-looking guys who didn't appear to be simple bartenders. They were bouncers.

"Funny, I was just about to say the same thing," Strider sneered.

"Come again?"

"Look at this," Strider said, kicking something up from the floor by his feet with the tip of his boot. Remarkably, it flew straight up, and he caught it in the palm of his hand.

"It's my wallet, which she just lifted from me. As for getting her face burned, well, I guess that's just divine retribution."

"So, now you're gonna lie to us?" the man said. He must've been used to this sort of thing, because he didn't back off. "At any rate, you just burned the face off some of our valuable merchandise. You're not getting off that easy!"

The gambling-parlor patrons began to relocate. Aside from the noise from the saloon, there wasn't another sound.

Once the hired muscle had surrounded him, Strider asked, "So, what do you propose?"

"That you come along quietly with me back to my office. And if you have a problem with that—"

"—that's where these guys come in?"

Strider opened his mouth. Pale blue flames spouted from it—it went without saying they were from the absinthe. Strider must've known some special trick to ignite it. Turning, he swept around a full three hundred sixty degrees. The man from the saloon, the bouncers, and even a distant section of the floor were engulfed in flames.

The saloon was ruled by shrieks of agony. Thrown into a crazed panic by the bouncers rolling around like human torches, the customers pressed en masse for the doors, with a number of them being trampled to death when they tripped and fell.

And the insanity those flames unleashed sparked another sort of madness—in the bio-man in the cage. His mind longed for slaughter, and the flames now compelled him to go berserk. The iron bars that had barely contained him twisted like taffy as he forced his way through them. Once out, he was a bloodthirsty beast on a rampage. Countless people and flames danced in his eyes.

She'd watched her target leave the Silver Castle. But even though she passed through the door not two seconds later, there was no sign of him. Entertainment district or not, the night was the world of the Nobility and monsters. Nobody walked around alone; people could be seen hustling toward different venues in groups, weapons in hand.

"Where'd he get to?" the female warrior mused, looking around, and then there was a dull sound to her left and a figure came flying through the air to slam against the ground. Judging from the thud he made, he must've been punched with terrific force.

Before Stanza could take another step, three more followed the first in succession, piling up on the ground. All in exactly the same spot. It was a work of art, the way each was struck with such precision that they landed in the same place and in the same pose as the first.

By the time the fourth one toppled over, Stanza had reached the turn into the alley from which they'd so mysteriously come. The alley ran down the side of the Silver Castle.

She halted. She'd heard a hoarse voice remark, "Using ranged weapons just isn't right."

Her right hand reached for the longsword on her hip—no, for pencil-like darts stuck through her belt. But before she did anything, her left hand drew a small mirror and held it around the corner.

Reflected in its surface was a giant of a man with both hands raised, and in

front of him with a gun leveled was a skinny man with the look of a ne'er-do-well about him. The giant looked to be about six foot eight and nearly 450 pounds, with a beard draped across his triple chins. Neither of them looked particularly charming, and in light of the four men lying in the road, this wasn't a friendly exchange. With a longsword hanging diagonally across that great continent of a back, spells to ward off supernatural creatures scrawled all over his leather vest, and an oversized pair of pants that would allow easy movement, the big man had to be a warrior. Most likely some drifting thugs had come after his money, and he'd underestimated the opposition—but it should be noted that those who'd set upon him must've been feeling quite sure of themselves. Though four of his compatriots had been put out of commission, the skinny man with the gun had more wrath than fear in his eyes.

"If you want my wallet, I'll give it to you," the giant said. His tone was calm. He was used to such situations.

However, this statement seemed unlikely to remedy matters.

"I'll take it off your corpse. Then me and my friends will get the hell outta here. Okay, start crying and pleading for your life."

Apparently that was why the skinny man hadn't shot him right away.

"Stupid amateur," Stanza suddenly muttered. Clutching a dart, her right hand rose.

It was at that very moment that the wall of the saloon beside the robber and his victim shattered with a terrific crash. Before any of the three knew what was happening, an enormous figure nearly ten feet tall and of inhuman proportions bounded out into the street. It was the same bio-man who'd broken through the cage and escaped—but before this dawned on them, the two men and Stanza noticed something on the creature's misshapen face. There was a huge lump wriggling under the bio-man's nose—actually, it was arms, legs, and a torso. He had a person in his teeth.

Flames shot out in the darkness, followed by a roar. The robber had fired his gun at the bio-man. Striking him squarely in the temple, the three-and-a-half-ounce lead slug bounced off.

The bio-man reeled, and the saloon patron dropped from his mouth. His right

hand rubbed at his temple. Beneath the bullet hole, protective iron plating could be seen. That wasn't an infraction—it was completely in keeping with the rules on upgrading combatants.

Confidence in the efficacy of the slug kept the skinny man from moving sooner. The speed of the bio-man's movements was a factor as well. When he raised his fist, it looked like a lump of clay. But the instant it made contact with the skinny man's head, it became a hammer. The man's head and neck were neatly driven down into his torso. It was amazing how the rest of his body remained standing perfectly straight.

Saloon employees raced out through the hole the bio-man had knocked in the wall, armed with cattle prods to subdue him. Other people spilled into the street.

The bio-man howled. Pale blue waves of electromagnetism from the prods assailed his titanic form. There were sparks from short circuits in a number of places on his gigantic form. Though the voltage was high enough to render a lesser dragon unconscious, in the case of the enraged bio-man, it only served to whip him into more of a frenzy.

One sweep of his arm mowed the saloon staff down like bowling pins. The body that hit the wall of the hotel across the street was a corpse by the time it sailed through the air.

"We've got no choice—gun him down!" commanded a man in a white shirt and bow tie, apparently the one in charge.

However, before they could concentrate their fire on the gigantic figure, the bio-man extended the fingers of his right hand and drove them into the ground. His arm went in all the way to the shoulder, as if he were plunging it into water.

A saloon employee came at the bio-man with a raised longsword. Catching the gigantic creature at the base of the neck, the blade halted when it struck the iron plate, and the waves of electromagnetism that still surged through the bio-man coursed into the man holding the sword, killing him instantly.

By this point, the robber's cohorts who'd been knocked into the street had picked themselves up and moved as a group to the entrance to the Silver Castle. Not that they were trying to get away. They were looking for a victim in the chaos.

Just then, someone behind them shouted, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

Turning, they found a dazzling light pulling away from the crowd at the entrance to the street and heading in their direction. It was Strider.

The four thugs exchanged glances that seemed to say, *What’s this clown all gussied up for?* but at the same time, there was a malicious gleam in their eyes.

What’ll we do? one whispered. *That stupid getup is flashy, but by the look of him, he’s a warrior.*

Kill him, another whispered. *Just open up on him without any warning.*

Nice, said a third. *Don’t give him a chance to draw his blade*.

They all reached for their guns in unison.

A sharp roar echoed down the night street.

Just as they were drawing the pistols from their holsters, the four thugs froze.

It was said that a genius at the art of war could knock a bird from the sky with a moment of concentrated resolve. Strider’s roar was equally powerful.

Leisurely walking over to the four thugs who’d become veritable statues and checking that no one else around was watching him, Strider reached into the coat pocket of the foremost robber with his right hand and pulled out his wallet. Quickly examining the contents, he said, “Sheesh, that’s just pathetic. I can see why they blew into town.”

Ignoring the fact that his own actions were equally immoral, he checked the wallets of the remaining three. With each of them, he spat in disgust.

“Well, not much I can do about this, I suppose. Guess I’ll go back to my room and have a drink.”

Saying this, the warrior spun around—and stopped cold.

At that moment, the bio-man was running amuck in the alley, and a giant of a man had stepped in front of him. The vicious beast raised his right hand. Onlookers began to flee, and Stanza was about to put the right hand she’d raised again into action—and then everyone stopped. The bio-man, the giant, and

Stanza.

Darkness was what they knew then. And the true nature of the unending terror that lay within it.

Strider's ears caught a certain sound. The bio-man, the giant, and Stanza all heard it too.

The darkness was coming. Riding death's black steed, with its iron-shod hooves.

Don't look! their souls ordered them. *Don't look, don't touch, don't smell.*

What was coming now, humanity was never meant to see. What was a human being? Something that had a soul. And that was why their souls commanded them, *Just let him pass*.

The horse and rider passed directly in front of the four thugs. They also went right by Strider's side. None of them turned to look. Everyone else nearby had paused, as well—including Stanza. Darkness in the form of a rider and mount passed immediately behind her. Only the bio-man turned and watched. He alone bucked the rule of the darkness, for he and the darkness had touched ever so slightly.

The terror drove the bio-man insane. Crouching down, he became a massive missile as he launched himself at the horse and rider.

No one saw what happened. The gleam of light that split the darkness, the sound of blade cleaving flesh and bone, the last dying breath expelled from the bio-man's lungs—no one caught any of these things. They heard the heavy thud of him hitting the ground.

Presently, the sound of the hoofbeats faded in the distance, and when the three warriors—who were ashamed that the spell of the darkness had frightened them—looked up, all they saw was a huge and horrible body lying in the street. Stanza and the giant were the first to race over to it. It was almost as if the sound of their footsteps, clearly of this world, was an indication that the spell of the darkness had finally been broken. They watched as the bio-man's colossal body split lengthwise from head to crotch, exposing a cut that was as clean as polished steel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku,* in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there are seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the Final Fantasy game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and for Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.